



Resilience

THE BRAZEN BULLS BIRTHRIGHT

SUSAN FANETTI

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SUSAN FANETTI

Resilience

THE BRAZEN BULLS BIRTHRIGHT

6

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ALSO BY SUSAN FANETTI

The Brazen Bulls Birthright

Redemption, Book 1

Rescue, Book 2

Resolve, Book 3

Renaissance, Book 4

Restless, Book 5

Reunion, Book 5.5

The Brazen Bulls MC:

(Complete Series)

Crash, Book 1

Twist, Book 2

Slam, Book 3

Blaze, Book 4

Honor, Book 5

Fight, Book 6

Stand, Book 7

Light, Book 7.5

Lead, Book 8

Salvage (spinoff novella)

The Brazen Bulls Beginning:

(Standalone Prequel)

Wait

THE NIGHT HORDE MC SAGA:

The Signal Bend Series:

(The First Complete Series)

Move the Sun, Book 1

Behold the Stars, Book 2

Into the Storm, Book 3

Alone on Earth, Book 4

In Dark Woods, Book 4.5

All the Sky, Book 5

Show the Fire, Book 6

Leave a Trail, Book 7

The Night Horde SoCal:

(The Second Complete Series)

Strength & Courage, Book 1

Shadow & Soul, Book 2

Today & Tomorrow, Book 2.5

Fire & Dark, Book 3

Dream & Dare, Book 3.5

Knife & Flesh, Book 4

Rest & Trust, Book 5

Calm & Storm, Book 6

Nolan: Return to Signal Bend

Love & Friendship

Capital City MMA:

Thunder, Book 1

Crazy Cat, Book 2

The Crossings Collection:

Love & Other Lessons

Impossible

Dream Come True

Sawtooth Mountains Stories:

(Complete Series)

Somewhere

Someday

Anywhere

Someone

The Pagano Brothers:

(Complete Series)

Simple Faith, Book 1

Hidden Worthiness, Book 2

Accidental Evils, Book 3

The Name of Honor, Book 4

Things Impossible, Book 5

The Pagano Family:

(Complete Series)

Footsteps, Book 1

Touch, Book 2

Rooted, Book 3

Deep, Book 4

Prayer, Book 5

Miracle, Book 6

The Northwomen Sagas:

(Complete Series)

God's Eye

Heart's Ease

Soul's Fire

Father's Sun

The Golden Door Duet:

(Historical Duet)

La Bellezza (The Beauty)

Il Bestione (The Beast)

Historical Standalones:

Nothing on Earth & Nothing in Heaven

Carry the World

Contemporary Paranormal Romance:

The House on Bitternut Street

As S.E. Fanetti:

Aurora Terminus

For Kristy

My sincere thanks and love to my family and my dearest friends.

You all keep my wheels on the road.

And a special shoutout to Alex, once my student and now my friend, who helped make sure I got Athena's experience as a Deaf woman right.

“There’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo.

And it’s worth fighting for.”

~ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*

CONTENT WARNING

I have included a content warning, but it is a major spoiler. I've therefore buried it at the back of the book. If you want to go in prepared, [you can find the warning here](#).

THE BRAZEN BULLS MOTORCYCLE CLUB

Mother Charter: Oklahoma

Officers:

Edgar "Eight Ball" Johnston, President

Richard "Maverick" Helm, Vice President

Seth "Dexter" Denson, Sergeant at Arms

Caleb Mathews, Secretary-Treasurer

Neil "Apollo" Armstrong, Technology Officer

Roland "Fitz" Fitzgerald, Road Captain

Soldiers:

Simon Spellman

Maxwell "Gunner" Wesson

Miles "Jazz" Brooks

Jacob "JJ" Jessup

Duncan Helm

Christian Grady

Prospects:

Montgomery Pickett

Samuel Spellman

Retired:

Brian Delaney

Conrad "Radical" Jessup

Nevada Charter

Officers:

Cooper Calderon, President

Benjamin “Big Ben” Haddon, Vice President

Zachary Jessup, Sergeant at Arms

Reed Haddon, Secretary-Treasurer

Kai Lewis, Technology Officer

Soldiers:

Alonzo “Lonnie” Little

Eugene “Geno” McCord

Prospect:

Jordan Redford

CHAPTER ONE

Sam cracked open an eye. “How short are you going?”

Lark shifted the scissors to her left hand and flicked his forehead with her right. “You said you trusted me. So trust me.”

He closed his eye again. He didn’t need to keep them closed to avoid seeing what she was doing; she’d insisted he not be able to look in a mirror until she was done, so the only view before him was her fridge. She had him sitting on a chair, which sat on an outspread sheet, in the middle of the kitchen in the apartment she shared with three other people. However, he was nervous as fuck about his cosmetology-student girlfriend giving him a haircut and a beard trim, and he felt a little calmer with his eyes closed.

She’d said he was starting to look like ‘some homeless loser’ and what would that say about her as a hairstylist, if her boyfriend wouldn’t even let her keep him looking nice. He’d actually been growing his hair long on purpose, and his beard, too. His old man had always had long hair and a long beard, and Sam liked that look. Especially now, as he was prospecting for the Brazen Bulls.

Unfortunately, Lark did not like that look. They’d been together almost a year, which made this officially his longest relationship yet. You’d think getting to an anniversary two weeks away would be easy, practically guaranteed, but nothing about romantic relationships had ever been easy for him, and certainly not guaranteed. The past eleven-and-a-half months with Lark had been the usual roller coaster of fights and tears and making up, of jealousies and explanations and pleas to understand, of giving up pleading and making demands instead, and then more fights and tears and making up. Just enough spells of peace mixed in around the turmoil to keep them both hopeful and invested in trying to make it work.

It was exhausting, but Sam knew it was his fault. Thus, he was trying to find places where he could give Lark what she wanted without fucking with other priorities in his life. Letting

her do whatever she was doing to his hair was a place where he could give her what she wanted.

And while he sat here, hoping he wasn't going to look like the lead singer of some 80s German pop band when she was through with him, he fretted about that anniversary. Lark would want a big deal made; she loved big deals. For her most recent birthday—her twenty-first—her parents had thrown her an actual ball. For her high school graduation (before his time), they'd sent her and her three best friends to Costa Rica for two weeks.

Lark was sweet. She had a decent sense of humor. She was really pretty. She was eager and appreciative in bed. When they were firing on all cylinders together, Sam really liked their relationship. They had their ups and downs practically daily, but it was his most successful relationship to date.

But she was spoiled as fuck, a total Daddy's Girl, and she was going to expect some Fifty Shades-level pampering (yes, she'd made him watch all three of those ridiculous weirdo movies) for their anniversary, he knew it. And he was thus almost equally sure that the whole thing would explode spectacularly on that day.

He had no trouble with the pampering. He couldn't afford the kind of shit her parents could, but he had some ideas about how to make her feel special, things she'd really like and appreciate. He paid attention to the girls he dated.

However, they had not said the word 'love.' Sam had never said that word to any girl he'd dated. He'd never felt the emotion it named with any girl he'd dated. Including Lark.

Lately, she'd made some comments that were shaped like little throwaways but had really been cryptic instructions. He knew she was in love with him but was withholding the word until he said it first. She wanted him to declare his love on their anniversary. Probably she wanted him to give her a promise ring or something.

That would not be happening.

Should he love her after a year? Probably. Was he defective because he couldn't manage to give girls what they wanted of him? Also probably.

Did every girl he'd ever been with think they knew exactly why he couldn't give them what they wanted? Definitely.

Were they right? Honestly, the answer to that was a thorny mess.

Hence the inescapable cycle of fighting, tears, making up, jealousies, explanations, pleas, and demands. Also hence sitting here in this kitchen giving up the way he'd wanted to look and hoping he wouldn't hate whatever his girlfriend was doing with her shiny-new stylist supplies.

"Are you done?" he asked, opening his eyes after she'd paused for a bit.

She set the scissors on the towel she'd laid out on the counter and picked up her blow dryer.

"Not yet. I need to dry you and finish your beard. Chillax, Sammy."

He did not enjoy being called Sammy. Lots of people, including his parents, had called him Sammy when he was little, and he felt like he was seen as a little kid when people used it now. When he'd told her as much, the very first time she'd done it, they'd been in bed, after fucking. She'd snuggled up close and said she loved it, and it would be her special name for him, only when they were alone.

He still hated it, but it was another of those things he figured he could give her without causing a big ripple elsewhere in his life.

She blew his hair dry—at least all this hair stuff felt good—and then took a trimmer to his beard. He could feel the blade guard right on his cheeks. So much for his good, thick beard.

It was just hair. It would grow back. Someday.

She switched off the trimmer. Sam kept his eyes closed as she ran her fingers over his cheeks and chin, and through his

hair. He could tell she'd taken a lot off. He'd just gotten it grown past his shoulders. Shit.

“Okay!” she chirped as she unclipped the beach towel from around his neck. “Ready to see?”

He opened his eyes; Lark smiled down at him and looked so proud and pleased, he couldn't help but smile back. He really did like her a lot.

Why couldn't he fall in love? It wasn't like he was incapable of love; there were people in his life he loved deeply, people he wasn't sure he'd survive without. Nor did he have some psychological trauma holding him back. Falling in love seemed simply impossible, like a circuit in him somewhere—his heart, he supposed—had never been connected.

“I'm ready,” he said.

Before she handed him the pink plastic mirror, she leaned down and kissed him. “You look so good, Sammy. So hot.”

She gave him the mirror.

What Sam saw reflected was not himself. It was some slick dude who went to a ‘salon’ twice a month and probably got a manicure with his fancy haircut and his artful three-day stubble.

Lark had also asked him more than once to let her give him a manicure; she didn't like how rough his hands were. He'd worked on his family's farm since he was like six years old until a year or so ago, and still helped out when he could. He had a laborer's hands.

He drew the line at manicures, but he did use the lotion she'd given him. His hands were still too rough for her liking.

“What do you think?” she asked when he'd been quietly staring at the stranger in the mirror for a while.

In her tone, he heard she was ready to have hurt feelings, so he smiled and looked up to catch her eyes. “You did a great job, babe. It looks really good.” And that was true; if he'd

wanted to look like a GQ asshole, he'd be happy with her work.

“Yes, but do you like it?” Lark asked, her eyes narrowing.

It was just hair. He could lie and make her feel good, and not give up too much. “I do. It looks awesome.”

“Yeah?” There was such relief, such *hope*, in her tone now, Sam felt like a total asscrack for not actually liking the result. More than his feelings were involved here. She was in school for this; she wanted to be a stylist—not just for hair, but makeup and clothes, too, eventually. His reaction could ding her self-confidence about what she wanted to do with her *life*.

He set the mirror on the floor and pulled her onto his lap. “I love it, babe. Thank you.”

All her sweetness and light, everything he really did like about her, sparkled in her bright blue eyes and pretty pink smile as she slipped her arms around his neck. “Thank you for trusting me,” she murmured; then she licked her pretty pink smile.

Sam slipped his hand up to her head. He closed his fist in her blonde tresses until the strands pulled lightly and she moaned. He drew her close and kissed her.

He really did like her.

The kiss came to a boil quickly, and Sam grabbed her legs and shifted her on his lap until she was straddling him. They ground together, feeling each other up through their clothes, feasting on each other's mouth, until Sam thought he'd lose his shit if he didn't get inside her soon.

“How long are we alone?” he gasped, grinding the words against her lips. He'd carry her to her bed if there was a chance a kitchen fuck would have an audience. Public sex wasn't his deal. Not even in the clubhouse.

“Long enough,” Lark answered, raking her long, manicured nails down his bare chest until she reached the buttons of his jeans.

Just then, his burner went off. He'd set it and his personal on the counter at the beginning of this makeshift salon appointment.

They both went still as the mood between them turned instantly to ice. With Lark, as with all women he'd ever tried to be with, his phones and what they represented were the inflection point of their troubles.

His family. His best friend. And now the club. All higher priorities for him than any woman he'd ever dated. He was defective. Or he was an asshole. Or both.

"Please don't answer it," Lark whispered, sincere pleading threaded through each word.

"It's the burner. You know I have to."

He was a prospect with the Brazen Bulls. It didn't matter that his father had been a Bull for something like thirty years, it didn't matter that his entire family was the club; he was only a prospect, and that meant he had no choice but to drop everything and run when the club called.

He'd been a prospect for almost a year now. That was another anniversary coming up in a few weeks. He had hopes that he'd get his patch at or around his one-year mark, when he was eligible; he damn sure wasn't going to do anything to fuck up that chance.

Grabbing Lark by the hips, he started to lift her off his lap—but she jumped off him instead and lunged at the counter, grabbing the ringing phone.

And then she fucking answered it.

"You've reached the phone of Sam Spellman—"

"Give that to me!" Sam yelled, trying to grab his phone from her, but she spun off and ran from the room, still talking through her squeals and gasps. Sam chased after her.

"I'm sorry, but he's not available to take your call—"

She was headed for her room, he thought. "Lark, fuck! Stop!"

No, not her room. At the last second, she ducked into the bathroom.

“—please leave a message after the beep. BEEEEEP!”

Sam slung himself into the bathroom just in time to see Lark drop his club burner in the *fucking toilet*. Roaring with fury and panic, he shoved her out of the way and snatched his phone out of the toilet water. *Please still work, please still work*. It was a burner, but it was a recent-model smartphone. It was supposed to have some degree of water resistance. *Please still work, please still work*.

It did. Thank fuck. He checked his recents and saw that Eight Ball, the fucking *club president*, was the one who'd called. He called immediately back; he'd worry about the toilet water on his face later.

“Get a leash on your little bitch, prospect! You think this is a fuckin' game?” Eight snarled when he picked up the call.

“I'm sorry, Eight. Won't happen again.” Sam finally looked at Lark, who was rubbing her elbow and looking scared and betrayed. As he took in more of the scene, he saw the torn shower curtain and the askew rod. He'd shoved her into the bathtub, more or less, and she must have bashed her elbow on the tile wall.

At the moment, he was too fucking pissed to be sorry about that.

“Better not,” Eight snapped. “Get your ass over here. Right now.”

“Okay. Clubhouse?”

“Yeah, the fuckin' clubhouse.”

“I'll be there in ten minutes.”

“Five, asshole. You got five.” With that, Eight ended the call.

Their president did not give one single fuck that Sam had called him Uncle Eight for most of his life. Now he was nothing but a prospect.

Wiping the phone dry on his jeans and slipping it into his pocket, Sam said, "I don't have time to get into how incredibly fucked up that was, Lark. But when I do have time, we are gonna get into it, trust me."

Lark's bottom lip actually pushed out in a pout. Her eyes filled with tears. "I just want you to care about me like you care about them. And her. And everything. Where do I rate, Sam? Am I fourth? Am I in the top ten? Am I even on the list?"

"I do not have time for this. I have to go now."

"But you *don't*. If you cared, you wouldn't."

Sam was on a five-minute countdown. He *did* have to go, right now. And he was too angry to try to make her feel better about it. So he turned and walked away.

~oOo~

Three hours later, Sam pulled onto the wide driveway of a sprawling house in Broken Arrow. He parked his 1993 Wide Glide between a black Mercedes GLS and a blue Fiat 500. The Armstrong women didn't care about American vehicles.

Probably he should have gone back to Lark's place and had it out with her, try to get through the fighting and tears to the making up, but he was dirty and tired and not in the mood for that scene. Definitely Lark would throw a rod if she learned that instead of going back to her he'd come here, but he was too dirty and tired to care about that. He needed to feel good, and there were two places in the world where he knew he'd feel good: here and home. Home was three times farther from the clubhouse than here, so he was here.

He went up the short walk and opened the door. "Hey! It's Sam!" he called as he stepped into the cool of the front hall.

"Kitchen!" Jacinda, Athena's mother and Sam's honorary aunt, called.

Sam followed the long hallway to the back of the house and entered the Armstrongs' gymnasium-sized kitchen. Between what Apollo earned as the Tech Officer of the Bulls, what Jacinda earned as a private investigator, and what she'd inherited several years back when her mother passed on, Sam thought the Armstrongs were maybe the richest people in the Bulls. They lived richest, at least.

"Hey, Aunt Jace," Sam said upon entering the room.

Jacinda was emptying out the dishwasher, so he went over and took the plates from her hand to put them away for her.

"Hey, Sam." Before he could turn away with the stack of plates, she caught his arm and tugged him down to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Ugh. You smell bad." Leaning back, she gave him her squinty 'on the case' look. "You smell like you've been digging graves. Please tell me you haven't been digging graves."

She signed the words as she spoke them. Athena, her daughter and Sam's best friend, was deaf and had chosen not to get cochlear implants or learn to speak, so the people who loved her were all fluent in ASL. Athena wasn't in the room, but her parents—especially her mother—tended to sign and speak whether she was around or not, like they'd gotten so used to using their hands to talk, the habit had become bound to the very idea of communication. Sometimes Jacinda forgot to actually speak until it was pointed out to her.

"Um ... not exactly," he answered as he went to the cupboard to put the plates away. When Jacinda's squint got even narrower, he explained, "We got a tow job at the station for an abandoned car. There were two dogs inside. It looked like they'd been left with the car and died of heat. Like three or four weeks ago. Monty and I had to deal with the mess."

"Oh my god. Oh honey. Are you okay?"

She knew that animals' pain hit him a lot harder than humans'. Possibly another defect in his programming. But it was why he couldn't manage the ride all the way home before he got some good feeling back in his life.

“It sucked, but yeah. I’m okay. Can I take a shower here?”

“You know you can. I’m sure we’ve got some of your clothes around, too. Probably upstairs in Athena’s room. After you shower and change, bring these clothes down and I’ll toss ‘em in the wash.” As he took another stack of plates from her, she cocked her head. “You cut off all your hair! And your beard!”

“Yeah.” After he put the plates away, he rubbed a hand over his short hair. “Lark wanted to practice. Does it look bad?”

“No, it looks good. Just different for you. You let your girlfriend cut all that hair off so she could practice? You’re such a good guy, Sam.”

Lark would no doubt have an extensive rebuttal to that claim. Sam only shrugged. “Is Athena upstairs?”

“Yep. She and Blanche had a big training day. They’re chilling upstairs. We’re ordering from Thai Blossom tonight, since Apollo’s on the run—you want in?”

Blanche DuBark was Athena’s new service dog. They’d been training together for a few months and were just about ready to graduate from the program. “Yeah, sure. That’d be great.”

“Your regular order?”

Sam grinned. This was home, too. He had at least two places in the world where he was loved exactly as he was, where he belonged, no matter what. “That’s perfect.”

He grabbed a couple apples from the fruit bowl on the island and headed upstairs to his best friend’s room.

CHAPTER TWO

Athena sat in her favorite spot in her bedroom, the LoveSac tucked in the corner by her closet. She was knitting, working on a Christmas present for her parents, a sofa blanket in a red ombre pattern. She did lots of needlecrafts—crochet, cross-stitch, embroidery as well as knitting—but knitting was her favorite.

She'd started when she was pretty young, like eleven, when her therapist had suggested she take up a hobby that could focus and calm her mind.

Those years, through middle school and the beginning of upper school, had been rough. She was severely deaf—one of several issues arising from her very premature birth—but, for whatever reason, maybe because she'd always gone to a Deaf school, she hadn't really thought of herself as different or limited until just before she hit her teens. When that realization had hit, the blow had been delivered with a freight train. Hence therapy, and the suggestion of a therapeutic hobby.

Knitting was *amazingly* therapeutic. It calmed her right down and let her think things through rationally. The other needlecrafts were good for that as well, but she liked the things she could make with her knitting needles. Also, she could do it just about anywhere. As a bonus: knitting needles were weapons, should she need one. And in this family, one never knew.

Her hearing dog, Blanche, lay beside the LoveSac, head on forepaws, alert but relaxed. They'd just had their last training session earlier in the day; there was a 'graduation' ceremony planned, but Athena would probably skip it. Mom wanted her to go and was on her back about it, but Athena thought 'ceremonies' like that were pretty dumb. But maybe Blanche would like seeing her doggo buds again.

Whatever. She'd decide when it was time to decide.

Blanche's pale Goldendoodle head came up and turned to look at the door. She rose and set her paw on Athena's leg,

alerting her that someone was at the door. Then, Athena could tell by the change in the light, the door swung open. Nobody in this family respected her privacy. Obviously she didn't expect them to knock, but her dad had installed a "doorbell" light outside her door. Too bad neither he nor her mom bothered to use the thing.

Ignoring the door and the mother who had, no doubt, just barged in, Athena set her knitting in her lap and signed, "Door?"

Blanche alerted again, then stood fully up and turned her body toward the door. She looked back at Athena.

"Good girl!" Athena signed. Just as she shifted to look back at the door, Sam dropped his big, dopey body onto the floor beside her. He had two apples in his hands and held one out to her.

Jesus. He smelled like he'd just dug himself out of his own grave. She took the apple and set it in her lap. "You stink," she signed. "Gross."

"Thanks a heap," he signed back, biting into the apple to free up his hands. "I just had to do seriously gross prospect shit, so fuck off. I'm gonna take a shower. I just need clothes to change into."

"Dresser. Bottom right drawer. Don't leave your dirties behind—they're disgusting. Put them in a trash bag or something. Or just put them in the trash." She set the apple aside and picked her knitting back up.

He rolled his eyes at her. "You're a real support," he deadpanned with his hands. "Glad I can count on you." With that and a scritch of Blanche's chin, he rolled to his big feet and went to her dresser.

He had a drawer of clothes in her dresser because he basically always had, from the time they were little. They'd been best friends almost literally from the womb; Sam was just a skosh more than a month older than her. He should have been about three and a half months older, but for her whole "born very premature" deal. Both their fathers were Brazen

Bulls; ergo, they were family, and born that close to each other, best-friendship hadn't even been a choice. They were basically siblings, practically twins.

She had a drawer at his house, too. Their parents had sort of shared them, one set foisting their kid off on the other whenever they wanted couple time or whatever. Even after Sam and Athena no longer needed a minder, even now that they were grown, it wasn't unusual for one to sleep over at the other's house—usually Sam sleeping here, since his folks lived out in the boonies.

Once he gathered up basketball shorts, underwear, and a t-shirt, he sauntered out of the room. Athena continued on with her knitting.

~oOo~

Sam was back from the bathroom in like fifteen minutes, and he smelled much better. He dropped his boots on the floor beside the door, then came over and plopped next to her on the floor again. Minnie, Athena's long-haired calico cat, who'd been sleeping on the bed, jumped down and into Sam's lap. He picked her up and snuggled her close. Blanche watched the cat with avid curiosity but left her alone.

Athena looked up—and noticed his head. “What happened to your hair? And your beard?”

Sam had always been on the shaggy side, and he'd started growing a beard while he was still in high school. He usually had a mountain-man vibe, like most of the men in their family. Now he was all slick and stubbly. He looked good, but not like himself.

“Lark wanted to practice for her class,” Sam explained after he set the cat in his lap.

Athena rolled her eyes. But before she could form a response, Sam's hand shot up.

“Don't start. Not today. It's been a shitty one.”

Athena nodded her acquiescence. She did not like Sam's girlfriend, and the feeling was decidedly mutual. Actually, none of Sam's girlfriends had ever liked her, and she hadn't liked any of them. Even Cherie, whom Athena had known first, from her school, had stopped being her friend after she'd started seeing Sam.

Athena wasn't sure whether she didn't like them because of who they were, or simply because they never liked her and always treated her like she was Dolly Parton's Jolene made flesh. The distinction was academic, really. The practical result was Sam's best friend and his girlfriend, whoever that girlfriend happened to be, hated each other.

Athena really tried. She wanted Sam to be happy, so she wanted to get along with his girlfriends. She'd love to be able to be *friends* with one someday. She just didn't know how to be Sam's best friend and not be threatening to girls he liked. The simple facts that she was also a girl and she and Sam's lives were knotted together about a hundred different ways made her a threat, period. And it completely sucked. It made her feel like the enemy.

Maybe she *was* the enemy, because those bitches were always trying to get him to choose between them, to choose them over her, and Athena would fucking gut a bitch before she'd give him up. Best friends from birth, practically siblings. That meant she had every right of a sister to be in his life, and fuck anybody who'd demand otherwise.

It could also be that Sam had shitty taste in women. He always went for cute, seemingly uncomplicated girls and always discovered that they were really a bramble of complications, just too fucking passive (and passive-aggressive) to put their thorns up front.

Then again, by the measure of best-friend compatibility, Athena's taste in guys wasn't much better. Hunter, her boyfriend, was no fan of Sam and ran hot and cold about whether he believed they were just friends. They fought about Sam more than anything else—not to say they didn't fight about a whole bunch of shit; Sam was just the top of a tall pile.

And Sam didn't like Hunter because he thought Hunter didn't treat her right.

Neither Hunter nor Lark was here now, however. Now, it was just her and Sam. So Athena set her knitting aside and patted her thighs. "Want to talk about it?"

Lifting his giant, hairy legs and spinning on his ass, Sam shifted positions and dropped his head onto her lap. Tired of his squirming, Minnie abandoned him and returned to her perch on the bed.

As Athena began to stroke his too-short hair—Sam was like a puppy and had loved to have his head stroked since he was a little kid—he put his hands up and began to tell her about his day.

"Lark was doing the hair and beard when Eight called my burner and I had to go in right away. So we fought about me leaving, as usual. I left things pretty bad. I probably should have gone back to hers instead of coming here."

Getting his attention so he'd look at her while she signed, she asked, "Why didn't you?"

He settled back as he answered, "Eight called me and Monty to clean out a tow job we got. Abandoned car. Two dogs left to die in there in the heat. Weeks ago."

Athena's hands went still in his hair. Oh god. Pretty much everyone in the Bulls family loved dogs, there were more dogs than children among them, but Sam was a practically fanatical animal lover. He'd grown up and still lived on a farm, with chickens and goats and horses and cows. They ate some of their livestock, but he loved every single animal on that property like they were family. He actually did a lot of the slaughtering, though it broke his heart every time, because he wanted to make sure they were comfortable and content all the way to the end.

Deep in the heart of his devotion to animals, Sam loved dogs above all. He even had a tattoo on his back, one of only two pieces he had so far, with three named paw prints, the print of each of the three dogs he'd personally owned: Bruiser,

Kali, and Tank. Two of those paw prints had born and died dates. Only the third, for Tank, was without a date.

The thought of Sam having to clean out the rotting bodies of dogs who'd died suffering made Athena's eyes itch and go blurry. She bent over and hugged his head. His arm came up and across her back to hold her close.

"Thanks," he signed when they unclenched. "That's why I didn't go to Lark's. I needed to feel good after that, and there's a big fight waiting for me there."

"The usual?"

His chest swelled as he sighed. "What else? I don't know why I keep trying. I'm never gonna find a girl who's okay with who I am."

He'd been with Lark almost a year. They fought a lot, but they always got through it, and Sam had never tried so hard with anybody else.

While Athena could happily never see the twat again, Sam liked her enough to stick with her this long. Athena had seen him happy with Lark, really enjoying her company. Maybe, if Lark could pull her head out of her ass and realize how fucking *awesome* Sam was, she could be the One. Maybe, if Lark could see Athena as his sister and not the competition, she could be the One. Maybe, if Lark could understand what it meant to be a prospect for the Brazen Bulls, not to mention a part of this bizarre family, she could be the One.

And maybe if hell froze over, Santa would deliver presents there.

"Who you are is wonderful, Samwise," she told him. "Somebody is going to see that and know they hit the jackpot. Maybe Lark will. If not, somebody else will."

He looked up at her, hazel eyes intense and still. He didn't respond for a long time. Finally, he signed, "You're a good hobbit, Mr. Frodo."

With a sigh of her own, Athena changed the subject and signed, "You want to stay for dinner? We're ordering from Thai Blossom tonight."

He grinned up at her. “I already placed my order with your mom.”

~oOo~

About an hour later, Athena and Sam were stretched out on her bedroom floor together, sharing the LoveSac as a pillow, reading—Athena was re-reading *Vengeful*, by V.E. Schwab, while Sam read the first book of the series, *Vicious*. She’d been trying to get him to start the series forever, but he’d kept saying he was too busy.

He’d never been too busy to read a good book until he’d started prospecting. But she got it; the Bulls were her family, too, after all. She understood what a reaming the prospect period was. Today, though, while he was avoiding most of his life, he’d finally picked it up—and was instantly engrossed, as Athena had known he would be. Their reading tastes didn’t make a perfect circle—he liked spy novels, ugh, and teased her about her love of romance novels—but the overlap was wide and included fantasy, horror, science fiction, and mystery.

Her phone strobed, and Blanche’s head popped up. She set her paw on Athena’s thigh and indicated the phone. The dog had been dozing, but Athena’s phone vibrated, too, and Blanche must have heard whatever that sounded like.

Athena was severely but not completely deaf. She could sometimes pick up a kind of sound, enough to be able to note a difference, especially during a hearing test, but she had no idea what the sound was. Sometimes, when she tried to explain the difference between “severely” and “profoundly” deaf, someone would ask what sounds she was able to hear, but how could she explain a sound when she had no idea what it was or any basis of comparison?

So she didn’t know what a vibrating phone sounded like, only what it felt like.

She picked her phone up and read the new text, then set the phone on her lap and told Sam, “Mom says the delivery guy is almost here.”

“Excellent. I’m starving,” he signed.

They made their way to their feet and headed out of her room and downstairs, Blanche trailing closely.

Just as they reached the foot of the stairs, the doorbell light strobed, and Sam veered off in that direction to answer. He called out, too, probably to tell Mom he had the door. His mouth was at an oblique angle, and Athena couldn’t read his lips to know for sure. Besides, yelling was harder to read than regular speech. People’s mouths got all, like, warped when they yelled.

Reading lips was the *worst*. She hated it. Hearing people thought she was getting every syllable they said, as long as they were facing her, but really it was like trying to make sense of a TV show that kept cutting out every few seconds. Outside her family, very few people really enunciated their words well enough for the shape of each one to make sense. She was mainly getting the gist.

After a few weeks of instruction when she was in grade school, Athena had decided not to learn to speak. She’d refused then because she’d found it impossibly difficult and frustrating even to understand what she was supposed to be doing to make words come out of her mouth. As she got older and learned more about things like the Deaf rights movement, she’d decided that she didn’t have to shape herself to a hearing world for their convenience. She’d continued to refuse to learn to speak, and, to her father’s disappointment, she’d refused cochlear implants, too.

Dad was a gadget geek, and Athena was pretty sure that was his main reason for wanting her to get the implants: he thought all tech was good tech. Mom was militantly in the ‘let Athena decide’ camp, or she might have ended up with implants when she was little.

Athena had decided, and she’d decided no. She didn’t need to be turned into a cyborg for the convenience of the hearing

world. She wasn't defective. She wasn't abnormal. She was simply deaf, and people were going to have to take her as she came or get out of her way.

She preferred to stay within her little bubble of family and fellow Deaf people, the people who could communicate with her in the way that was normal and comfortable for her: ASL. The rest of the world could suck a turd.

Athena waited near the door, ready to help carry the food. They were only three for dinner, but Sam could seriously eat, and Dad would want leftovers when he got back, so Mom usually ordered like she was laying out a meal at the clubhouse.

Yep, the delivery guy handed over three big paper sacks. Athena stepped up and took one from Sam as he was trying to juggle all three. He smiled and nodded his thanks, and he followed her back to the kitchen.

The kitchen of this stupidly big house was stupidly big. It was one of those "open concept" deals, part kitchen, part eating area, part 'hearth room,' and Mom loved it. Athena had liked it when she was thirteen and they were about to move into it, because then it had been empty, about the size of a middle-school gym, and the laminate floor was *awesome* for sock-skating. Now, full of furniture, it basically looked like an Ethan Allen showroom or something. Or like the "community room" of Hunter's apartment complex. And wasn't nearly as much fun.

Mom was setting out plates and glasses on the 'breakfast table,' where they ate all of their meals except for parties and holidays. "Get your drinks," she signed. "There's fresh sun tea, and the usual Pellegrino and Diet Coke. Or do you want wine, honey?" she asked Athena. "I'm going to open a bottle of Sauv Blanc."

Athena wasn't in the mood for wine. She didn't like alcohol all that much, and she hated the disorientation of drunkenness, but sometimes, when she wanted to feel grown up, she had wine with her mom. "I'll have Coke."

“I’ll get it,” Sam signed and went to the fridge. “Can I have one of Uncle Apollo’s beers, Aunt Jace?”

“Sure, honey,” Mom signed. They weren’t speaking, just signing. That was the usual case here at home; though both her parents were hearing, they rarely spoke when she was present, unless there was someone also present who wasn’t fluent in ASL. Her whole close family stopped using their mouths to communicate when she was around, even when they were talking to each other and not to her. Sam had told her that her parents tended to sign even when she *wasn’t* around and they *were* speaking.

Athena loved it; she wasn’t missing a single thing, and the only other time in her life that was true was at school, surrounded by other Deaf people. Which was why when she’d graduated, she’d turned right around and gotten a job as a tutor at the school. She never wanted to leave. Now she was working on getting her degree online so she could be a real teacher there.

“Okay!” Mom said as everybody sat down with their drinks. The family-size containers from Thai Blossom were arrayed in the center of the table, their lids still on. “I got the usual. There’s spring rolls, spicy fried Brussels sprouts, drunken noodles, gai tod, and chicken satay. Help yourself, but remember Dad will be happy to find leftovers in the fridge when he gets home.”

For a while, conversation halted as they filled their plates. Once everyone started to dig in, Mom asked, “Do you have everything set for this weekend?”

With a glance at Athena, Sam answered first. “I think so. We don’t really plan that much. Just get everybody there with the food and booze.” He grinned at Athena, and she grinned back. Yep, that was about right.

With their birthdays just weeks apart—Sam’s in August and Athena’s in September—they’d shared a birthday party for as long as they could remember, scheduled on a weekend between their actual respective days. However, starting with their eighteenth, they’d been throwing the party themselves, as

a weekend at the club's cabin. Last year, the club had cleared the way for them to have the cabin on Labor Day weekend, and they were getting that same weekend again this year.

"I'd think after last year, you'd plan a little more from now on," Mom said.

Things had gotten pretty wild last year—like 'Visit from the Osage County Sheriff and Two Deputies' and 'Two Partiers at the ER for Stomach-Pumping' wild. But that was due to it being their twenty-first birthday more than anything else. The whole theme of the weekend had essentially been 'drink until you can't.'

Ironically, neither Sam nor Athena, the two having the legal-drinking birthday, had ended up getting a charcoal smoothie. Athena had barely been tipsy. Sam had been drunk, but not sloppy. He was too upstanding a guy to get sloppy drunk, even on his twenty-first birthday.

"This year will be different," Athena told her mother. "We're not inviting as many people, and both Lark and Hunter will be there." Last year, Sam hadn't met Lark yet, and Hunter had broken up with Athena a couple weeks before. This year, she figured the party would be more 'couple-y' and therefore a little bit mellower. Less 'Round 20 of the Flip Cup Tournament,' more 'Hooking Up in the Boathouse.'

Sam made a subtle face at Hunter's name. Since that three-week breakup—and the two-week one that had followed in February—Sam had decided that Hunter needed to go. He tried to be okay when Hunter was around, and he did a fair job of it, but if Athena gave him an opening he'd leap through it with an impassioned speech about how she deserved better.

Athena and Hunter had been together for more than two years, not counting those two 'breaks.' Maybe she loved him; she told him she did, and she used to be sure of it, but those breakups had introduced some doubt—or maybe caution was a better word. They had a lot in common, something she couldn't say about almost anybody else in the world. He didn't speak or have (or want) hearing aids or implants, because he had the same feelings about that stuff she did. He was the

lower-school gym teacher at their school and had also been a student there. He was great with the little kids, which seemed like a big green checkmark in the ‘pro’ column.

Not to mention that he was hot and fit. And great in bed—as far as she knew; she’d never slept with anybody else. He gave her orgasms, so that seemed pretty great to her.

He could be snotty, but so could she. Yes, he’d really hurt her, breaking up with her twice because things were getting ‘too intense’ between them, but he’d come back both times groveling, explaining how his feelings for her were so deep and true it freaked him out sometimes.

It was kind of romantic, right? That he cared so much for her he sometimes felt like he had to run from it? He was practically a hero straight out of a romance novel. She could forgive the ensuing heartbreak once or twice.

Besides, how many hot, straight, unmarried, adequately employed, age-appropriate men who were fluent in ASL was she going to find in Tulsa, Oklahoma? She probably knew every single one of them by name.

She got why Sam didn’t like him. The tension between those guys wasn’t like the tension between her and any girl Sam had ever dated. Hunter wasn’t really threatened by Sam. But Sam thought Hunter didn’t treat her right, and from his perspective, she understood. She’d kick the ass of any girl who’d hurt Sam. She got why he didn’t like her boyfriend, got his frustration with her for sticking with him, and loved him for trying to keep his feelings to himself around Hunter so he wasn’t in the way of the relationship she wanted.

No question, Sam was a better human, all around, than Hunter or like ninety-five percent of the human race. If she’d met Sam randomly somewhere, no question she’d be into him, as any breathing person who was into men should be. But she hadn’t met him randomly somewhere, she’d been raised with him essentially in the same crib, so ... ewww.

“I hope it will be different,” Mom signed. “You both know Eight will lose his shit if he gets a call from the sheriff again.” She looked at Sam. “And that could really fuck you up.”

“I know,” Sam answered. “We’ll be careful.”

Neither of them were looking her way, so Athena clapped once to draw their attention. “It’s so messed up the deputies ratted us out.”

“No, dear,” Mom signed, giving Athena her ‘running out of patience’ look. She only signed ‘dear’ when she was irritated. “It’s messed up to get so wild somebody called them. I mean, seriously, both of you. That’s the club’s cabin. I can assure you that you are not the first partiers to get wild up there. But you are the first to get busted for disturbing the peace. My mind reels trying to understand how fucking out of control you had to be to get people to call law on the *Bulls*.” She flung her hands out in resigned disappointment. “You’re lucky you still get use of the place, but you won’t if you fuck up again.”

“It’s not my fault it got loud.” Athena pointed out.

Her mother made it clear she was not impressed by that point.

But Sam laughed. “No, it’s not, but be real, Athena. You’re the loudest person I know.”

Mom laughed too, and Athena sulked. They meant that she, apparently, slammed doors and drawers, banged pots and pans, and so on—that she was loud simply moving through the world. Maybe so, but whatever. How was she supposed to know? Okay, yes, she knew how to close a door ‘quietly,’ and she mostly tried to do so. But it seemed like the difference between quiet and loud was smaller and more nuanced than she could possibly understand. She’d been lectured about ‘slamming’ things around when she’d actually been trying to be quiet, so whatever.

Her phone flashed, and her mother glared at it. She hated having phones at the table.

Ignoring her, Athena flipped her phone over—a text from Hunter: *Hey babe, want to come over? I’ll cook.*

Mom waved her hand and got Athena’s attention. “You know how I feel about phones at the table.”

“It’s Hunter. He wants me to come over. Just a sec.”

She texted back: *I’m eating rn with fam. So no need to cook for me, but I can come over after, be there in 30-45 mins. That work?*

He sent back a single word: *Sure.*

That period was problematic. He was annoyed. Athena sighed, returned *Okay, see you soon xoxo*, and set her phone down.

Mom and Sam were looking at her like she’d disappointed them both.

“Get over yourselves,” she signed and dug back into her gai tod.

CHAPTER THREE

After dinner, Athena went to Hunter's place, so Sam headed out when his clothes were through the laundry. He considered going to Lark's, but he was still seriously pissed at her. Eight had just about torn his head off at the station about 'letting' his girlfriend (not the word Eight had used) use his burner and not taking his prospecting duties seriously. Eight shouted at the prospects all the time, and Sam knew enough to know it was about half hot air—Eight liked giving the prospects a hard time. But today he'd been truly livid. Sam was legitimately worried now that Lark's little toilet stunt had damaged his chance for a patch.

Monty had been witness to it all and had blown off Sam's worry while they were cleaning out the car. Monty was sure Sam was a shoo-in for a patch, being Simon's son and all. Sam wished he was that sure.

He'd always loved the club—it made up his family, after all—but he'd never been all that interested in being a member. He'd grown up during the Perro years, and that shit had been scary as fuck. Dad had been inside for almost all of that time, and Sam, Mason, and their mom had been *glad*—being in a federal prison had made him safer than any Bull on the outside. Or anyone in their family.

Not that prison was a summer camp. Those years had been hard on Dad, too. He'd always been a pretty quiet guy and kind of boring for an outlaw (his big hobby was building elaborate model ships), but since he'd finished his stretch and come home, he was even quieter—and a lot older than the five years he'd been away.

For Mason, watching all that had made him want a patch even more. He saw the club like an army, doing what they had to do to keep their people strong and well and safe. Sam saw that, too, but he also saw that, like an army, they were doing shit that put them and their people in harm's way, which was why they needed to do some extreme shit to try to keep everybody they cared about safe.

He'd never had much ambition for anything else, however. In school, he'd gotten good grades, but he hadn't had a favorite subject. It had all bored him about equally. Maybe English was a slight favorite, because he liked to read. When he was little and people asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd say about a hundred different things, none of them actual career interests, all of them inspired by whatever book he was reading. Like 'lion tamer' and 'spaceman' and 'Sherlock Holmes.'

Even as he grew to adolescence, when everybody in school was thinking about college or jobs or whatever, he hadn't been interested in any. He liked working with animals, and he was good at that, but he was already doing that. So he'd figured he'd stay on the farm and keep helping his mom take care of the place like he always had.

But then one Saturday early last summer, he'd been working the family produce shop, sitting on the porch rail during a rare lull and looking out over the Oklahoma countryside. All of a sudden, he'd been completely bored with that life, too. Since he'd finished high school, he'd spent so much of his life alone. In the fields or the stables, at the produce shop, wherever, he'd been alone so much.

He liked the quiet, for sure. But on that day, the quiet had wrapped around his neck and squeezed. He'd been lonely.

That was the first time he'd asked himself if he might want to prospect.

It took him most of that summer to figure out the answer: he wanted to be a Bull. Not for the wild parties, not for the adrenaline rush of dangerous work, not for the outlaw cred. But because he was lonely and wanted his family around him, and that was where they were: the clubhouse.

A year into prospecting, he still wanted that patch. He needed to be part of the brotherhood as well as the family. And he'd realized that the danger occasionally hunched over the clubhouse was in his life whether he spent Saturdays sitting on a rail at the produce shop or riding Russian guns to Mexican drug lords. Shit, the farm had been burned to the ground, and

his grandfather with it, by club enemies before Sam was even born. He wasn't saving himself or anyone else to steer clear of a patch. At least with a patch, he could fight back.

But *damn*, he did not want to have to wait the full two years for that patch. Currently, being around his family meant being bossed around, yelled at, given horrible jobs, and generally being treated like shit by people he loved. He wanted to get through prospecting as fast as possible.

Speaking of which, he mounted his bike—handed down from his father—and pulled his burner, making sure he hadn't missed a call or text. Nope, all clear. Phew.

So ... should he go to Lark's?

Thinking about it, he put his burner away and took out his personal. A text from Mom, asking him to run by the IGA on his way home and giving him a short list of things she wanted—all breakfast stuff, like cereal, pancake syrup, orange juice. He sent back a thumbs up so she'd know he was on the job.

No other messages. Usually Lark texted him like three times an hour, whether he could chat or not, but she'd been silent since he'd left her place hours ago. She was seriously pissed, too. Sam remembered that he'd pushed her away from the toilet pretty hard and maybe hurt her.

He felt bad about that. He'd never want to hurt a girl. But also, *fuck*. She'd been way out of line.

He needed to apologize for pushing her, and he needed to demand she never do something like that again. They needed to have this out. Which meant he needed to go over there so they could.

Staring at his personal, he sighed. Fuck.

Not tonight. He couldn't deal with that drama tonight.

He put his phone away, fired up his bike, and headed to the corner of rural Oklahoma that was his home.

It was almost dark, only the last dregs of gloaming lightening the edges of the sky, when Sam arrived home.

Wesson Farms had been in his mom's family for generations. After the fire that had destroyed most of the property and killed his grandfather, for whom Sam had been named, Mom and her brother, Gunner—also a Brazen Bull—had built up something new. Still the same farm, but now the home of both their families. Uncle Gun, Aunt Leah, and their kids, Aidan and Larissa, had a house about fifty yards away from where Sam lived with his parents and brother.

Mom and Uncle Gun owned the property jointly, but in practice everything but Gun's house, garage, and the yard around it was Mom's. She was the real farmer in the family.

She hadn't started out that way. She'd gone to college, wanting to get free of the farm and the tiny town of Grant. But then her and Gun's mother and brother—Gun's twin—had been killed in a tornado, and Mom had dropped out of school and come home to take care of what remained of her family.

Sam had heard that story plenty of times, and he knew it was true. But it wasn't so easy to believe even so. He couldn't imagine his mom being anything but what she was: a farmer and all-around earth mother. She was woven and rooted into this place like the monster honeysuckle bush that was taking over the side of the stable.

Wesson Farms had been a real farm in prior generations, but since the fire it had been a much smaller thing. Most of the property was left wild, for the horses and goats to wander around in, for Sam and Mason to explore on foot, horseback, or ATV. Only a few fields produced, about thirty acres in all. Enough to feed their two-house family, fill the bins at the produce shop, and sell to a few markets in nearby towns.

That produce shop was open only in the mornings, Sunday through Wednesday, and all day Saturday, from late spring through the harvest. Mom had started it long ago, selling the overflow of the kitchen garden out of the back of her old station wagon on the weekends. Now it was an actual building

and probably the most popular farm-fresh stand in Oklahoma. She made good bank and paid Sam and Mason well for the work they did.

Maybe she hadn't always wanted to be a farmer, but she'd made it something she loved, and that had made it a success. Sam loved it, too.

He loved his home best of all at exactly this moment: when the daytime world was buttoned up tight, and every building, tree, and fence post was only a shadow against the darkening sky. Tonight, with a sliver of moon, that sky was clear and full of stars. Whippoorwills sang, crickets chirped, and frogs peeped. Earthen scents of life wafted on the breeze sweeping the day's heat away.

All of that was an infusion of peace directly into his veins, but the very best part was the house: the squares and rectangles of light in the darkness, the tiny pictures of the people he loved best doing their things. Tonight, there was a bigger rectangle of light across the drive as well; Dad was in the garage and had one of the doors up.

Sam had groceries in his backpack, including a chilled bottle of orange juice, but he decided he could take a few minutes and detour to the garage on his way into the house. He parked his bike in its usual spot, beside his 1970 Dodge D100 pickup.

Mom had bought him that truck for his sixteenth birthday. Sam had wanted to restore an old car, so she'd presented him with a junkyard wreck, and he'd been thrilled. But the job had been lonely and really hard for a kid on his own. Uncle Gun had helped him out, which was why anything at all had gotten done on the thing at first, but Gun's mind was kind of chaotic. It definitely didn't work like Sam's did.

Uncle Gun wasn't very good at explaining things so Sam could learn, they'd both gotten frustrated with each other, and Sam had finally lost heart for the work. The rusty husk had sat on blocks for almost a year, until Dad had been released from prison. Dad was the kind of teacher Sam could learn from.

They'd finished the truck together and reformed their bond in the process.

He would never fucking sell that truck, no matter what.

Now he strode to the garage with his grocery-crammed pack on his back. Mom's SUV was parked in the bay with the open door, and the hood was up. A fender cover was draped over the side. Dad's phone sat on the corner of the workbench, softly playing 'Smoke on the Water.'

Scenes like this were high on Sam's list of favorite things, too.

"Hey, Dad," he said as he came through the open bay door.

Dad leaned over and smiled when he saw him. "Hey, son. You cut your hair off."

He rubbed his head self-consciously. "Yeah. Lark wanted to do it for practice. I figured why not. It's only hair, right?"

"That's right. And it's good to make your woman happy. Speaking of which, did Mom catch you? She needed something from the market."

Sam patted a strap of his pack. "Got it all here. Something wrong with the Jelly Belly?"

Mom was most definitely not a car person and drove whatever she had until it fell completely apart, which took a long time in a household with one mechanic and two other very handy people in the house. This Explorer was ten years old, meaning Mason and Sam had been kids when she'd bought it new. They'd decided the blue beast looked like a Jelly Belly, thus its name was born.

It didn't look like a Jelly Belly, at least no more than most SUVs did.

She'd brought the Jelly Belly home new about two weeks before Dad had been arrested for arson, working a Bulls job for the Perro Blanco cartel.

Not until Sam was grown did he really understand the situation, but now he knew the Feds had pressed Dad hard for intel on the Perros. He'd kept his mouth shut, of course, and

pleaded guilty. He'd been sentenced to ten years at Beaumont, a high-security federal penitentiary in Texas. He'd served five and been paroled on good behavior.

During those five years, Sam and Mason had seen their father a total of ten times. If he'd done his full sentence, he'd only be getting released about now. Sometimes Sam thought of how close he and Mason had come to losing their dad for a decade, all the most important years of their childhood, and his whole body would clench. Five years was bad. Twice that would have been so much worse.

"Nah," Dad said, standing up straight, then bending backward, groaning as he stretched. "Just some regular maintenance. I heard about the scene at the station this afternoon. You wanna grab us some beers and talk it out?"

"Yeah, sure."

He headed to the far corner of the six-bay garage, where they had a 'relaxation station' set up, with some ratty cast-off armchairs, a fridge and a cabinet of snack foods, and a TV on the wall. Dad, Sam, and Mason also parked their bikes in that bay when the weather was bad.

Setting his pack on the floor between the fridge and the snack cabinet, Sam pulled out the orange juice and put it in the fridge before he grabbed two cans of Budweiser. Then he smiled as he heard the familiar sound of a hundred-forty-pound mastiff mix running hellbent for leather from the house into the garage.

He set the beers on top of the fridge and got ready to catch his dog.

"Hey buddy!" he cheered as Tank launched himself off the garage floor and crashed into Sam's chest.

This was a thing he'd taught Tank to do when he was a puppy. Back then, it had been a cute trick, a puppy who gave hugs. Sam would hold his arms out, and Tank would leap up and put his forepaws on Sam's shoulders and then bathe his face in kisses. But they hadn't realized that Tank wasn't the usual pit bull mix but was instead fully half American Mastiff

until they'd done one of those DNA things. By then it was too late; Tank was well trained in giving hugs and absolutely loved doing it.

Now Tank was three years old, practically the size of a pony, and getting a hug from him often resulted in crashing backward to the ground to be pinned by him while he tried to lick Sam's face off.

Sam still thought it was seriously cool. And Tank only hugged him, so they weren't responsible for any head injuries to unsuspecting parties.

This time, Sam was ready, and he grabbed his dog and held him while he gave his kisses. Thinking of the poor dogs from this afternoon, he hugged Tank all the harder and tucked his face against his muscular shoulder.

His own shoulders started to complain before either Sam or Tank was ready to let go. When he did, Tank snuffled around the garage floor until he got to the backpack, then devoted all of his olfactory attention to the smells therein.

"No, T. Don't slobber all over my pack. Sorry." He picked it up and set it on top of the fridge. From the snack cabinet, he grabbed the canister of dog treats and offered a few of those instead. And then he wiped his now-slimy hand on his jeans and picked up the beers.

When he headed back to the other side of the garage, with Tank at his heels, he noticed his father watching quietly and got the sense he'd stood there taking in the whole scene.

"You okay?" Dad asked as Sam handed him a Bud.

"Yeah. Today was fucked up for a lot of reasons, and that car was definitely the capper, but I went over and hung with Athena for a while, and I talked it out enough. I'm okay now."

"Good. If you need to do more talking, I'm here."

Dad swallowed down about half his can, then set it on the bench and returned to the Explorer's engine. He was finishing a spark-plug replacement. That was a one-man job, so Sam leaned back against the bench and let him work. Tank sat beside him, leaning against his leg, panting happily.

“Can I ask you something, Dad?” Sam asked after a few minutes of companionable quiet.

Dad looked at him under his arm. “Of course. What’s up?”

“It’s about the prospect period.”

“Sure, but be careful, Sam. You know I’m not gonna tell you anything that’s under seal. You don’t get inside info from me. Or Gun, either. Prospecting is what it is.”

“I know. I’m not asking for special treatment.” Not that he’d hate it if he got some. In truth, he felt like he was getting the opposite, like everybody was *harder* on him because he was a legacy. “But would it be out of line to ask how many guys have been patched when their year was up? Chris and Duncan had to go the full two, and I think Jay did, too, right? I don’t know past them.

Dad looked at him under his arm again, then stopped what he was doing and turned around to face him. He crossed his arms and leaned on the Jelly Belly’s fender.

“I don’t suppose that’s out of line to ask, but off the top of my head, I don’t know for sure. Without looking it up, I’d say it’s more usual to go two years, or close to it, unless the club has a real need for patches.”

Sam sighed but tried not to let his disappointment show. Another full year of this shit. “That’s the determining factor? Whether the club is desperate to fill seats? It doesn’t matter how good the prospect is—so there’s no way to know if I’m fucking up?”

His father studied him for a while. “Okay. First, if a prospect is really fucking up, we wash him out. So yeah, there’s a way to know that. If you’re still a prospect, you’re still under consideration. Anyway, I can say I haven’t seen anything from you that would give me concern about patching you in when the time comes. You’re doing fine, son. Yeah, it’s hard and fucking unpleasant to prospect. I still remember my time wearing a blank kutte in detail, and it was more than thirty years ago. It’s tradition to make life hard for prospects, but there’s reason in it, too. If you stick it out through

disgusting work and humiliating treatment, and you still want a patch, that says something about the kind of patch you'll be. One who sticks. One who can stand waist-deep in blood and shit and still be proud to wear the Bull."

"I get it. I do. I just ... if I can prove that a little faster ..."

"Maybe this isn't something I should say, but I want you to think practically, too. Prospects are free labor. When we're not desperate to put asses in seats, patching somebody in means we lose free labor—and our individual takes shrink when someone new takes a seat, too. That's why there's maximum as well as a minimum. Keeps everybody honest."

"You're saying it's gonna be another year before I even come up at the table."

"I'm saying if you don't think you can stomach another year, that says something. And you should think about it." He came over then and leaned on the bench at Sam's side. "I love you no matter what. I'm proud as fuck of the man you've become. This life ... You got to want it like Tank wants you. Anything less and it will tear your soul out and grind it to dust. So if you've changed your mind—"

"No, Dad. I want it. I haven't changed my mind." He hadn't. He just wanted to fast-forward through this bullshit. And he never wanted to scrape dead dogs into five-gallon buckets of goo and fur and bone again.

With a nod, Dad continued, "If you do change your mind, there's no judgment. Not from me, not from Gun, not from anybody who matters. Do what's right for you."

Standing here beside his father, hearing words he'd needed, Sam suddenly realized that the day had taken a far greater toll on him than he'd admitted even to himself. He'd felt like an asshole with Lark, and also entirely disrespected. He'd been shouted at and forced to do a job that had battered his heart, and nobody at the station—men who were his family, men he'd looked up to all his life—had given a shit about that.

Exhausted and overwhelmed, Sam let his head fall to the side until it rested on his father's shoulder. "I love you, Dad."

His father set his hand on Sam's head. "I love you, too, Sam."

CHAPTER FOUR

*Are you sure you don't want me to come
up tonight? I can help set things up.
Besides, I won't mind having a quiet
night in the woods with you tonight.*

Hunter ended that text with a selection of lewd emojis.

It was Sam and Athena's birthday weekend, and they were headed up to the club's cabin in the Osage. The plan was to drive up together on Friday night, stock up the party supplies they'd bought, make sure everything in the cabin and the yard was in decent shape, get the boat and jet skis to the dock and make sure everything was gassed up, set up the tents, make sure there was firewood, and generally get the cabin ready to party. Hunter and Lark were both planning to come up, separately, around noon tomorrow, for a few hours of quiet couple time before everybody else descended on the place for the party that would start Saturday afternoon and go to about noon Sunday.

Athena looked across the cab of Sam's pickup. Blanche half-dozed between them with her head in Sam's lap. Sam's hand was under her ear, absently scratching. Blanche took her 'off-the-clock' time seriously, and she loved Sam like he was her back-up person. Dogs knew when somebody was Team Dog.

Sam had left Tank back home, since he got hyper around a lot of people, and when a bear-sized dog got the zoomies, life, limb, and property were at risk. Blanche was along because she'd be working. This party would be their first really chaotic social event together when they were flying without a net. No simulated chaos, no trainer present, not even any parental supervision. Just Athena and Blanche at a big weekend-long party.

Athena wasn't worried. Before Blanche, she'd managed okay at their previous parties, and about half their invited

guests this weekend, as in the past, were also deaf. There could even be a couple other hearing dogs at the party. And having Blanche with her meant that she'd be able to do more of the outdoor stuff, like actually get in the lake without needing somebody to babysit her.

Sam was worried, but Sam was always worried anytime Athena took a step out of her bubble.

She reached out and tapped Sam's shoulder. He was driving, so he couldn't watch her sign for long, but she quickly told him, "Hunter's asking to come up tonight."

Sam thought about that for a second. Then, with one hand, he asked, "Do you want him to?"

Athena didn't need a second to think. She shook her head. "I like having Friday be just us."

"Me too."

Returning to her phone, she typed, *I'm sure. We've got a lot of boring setup to do. But you're staying Sunday night, too, right? We'll have our quiet night under the stars then, when everybody else is gone. xo*

Hunter read the message. The dots came up and did their little dance for several seconds before his one-letter reply popped up: *K*.

With a sigh, Athena leaned forward and pushed her phone onto the truck's dash. Hunter was irritated again. He didn't like being thwarted from what he wanted. That wasn't specific to any conflicted feelings he had about Sam; Hunter simply liked to have his way. He recognized it about himself and tried to keep a lid on it, but it leaked out around that lid. Thus, she got terse replies like that one.

Sam waved and got her attention. "Is he mad?"

"Irritated, yeah. It's okay. It'll be fine when he gets here tomorrow."

She hoped it would be fine, at least.

Sometimes she kind of wished she'd grown up with a girl best friend. There would be a lot fewer complications in her

romantic life if she had. But then she wouldn't have Sam. He was worth all the complications.

~oOo~

The cabin was pretty decent. It was old, but they kept it in good shape, and anyway, it was old in the cool, kitschy way a weekend cabin at the lake should be. About ten years ago, the club had done a light remodel of the place, tearing up ancient linoleum flooring and peeling wallpaper, laying down distressed laminate flooring and putting up new wallpaper, upgrading the bathroom fixtures and the kitchen appliances, stuff like that. Athena had preferred it with all the old stuff (it had been like a trip to the 1950s), but they'd done a pretty good job of keeping the vibe intact. It smelled different now, though. She missed whatever the old smell had been.

There were three bedrooms, a bath and a half plus an old outhouse they kept in good shape for those times when two toilets weren't enough. The living room was huge and had two fold-out sofas. A big screened porch overlooking the lake led off the living room. It had some old Florida-style outdoor sofas that had been used for sleeping occasionally as well. The kitchen was also huge, with a table that could seat ten, though when there were that many people at the cabin, they were much more likely to be eating outside, where the firepit and picnic tables were.

They'd have more guests this weekend than there were places to sleep, so after Sam and Athena unloaded their party supplies and got the jet skis and the speedboat out of the boathouse and over to their dock, they spent more than an hour pitching four four-person dome tents and dropping rolled sleeping bags in them. The ground near the cabin was level and covered in pine needles and an almost silky layer of dirt under those, so the people who'd be passing out in those tents would be comfortable enough.

Blanche was at Athena's side all afternoon, doing her job, which was to be aware of their surroundings in ways Athena

could not and alert her to those things she couldn't be aware of.

Athena actually did pretty well on her own, but that was mainly because she rarely left her little bubble of school and family when she was on her own. That bubble was set up for a Deaf person—for her specifically. She wanted someday to get an apartment and be truly independent, and getting a hearing dog had been her parents' suggestion for how they'd feel comfortable letting her fly the nest.

She'd balked at first; a service dog seemed like just a different kind of minder, and what her parents were comfortable with didn't officially matter, seeing as she was an adult. But she didn't like them to worry, so she eventually arranged it in her head that a service dog was just a cuddly pet with buffs for protection and alertness, and then she agreed.

After going through training with Blanche, she understood that a service dog was really the opposite—a wary protector with buffs for cuddliness and lovableness—but she also understood that Blanche was not a minder but a partner.

Case in point: there were probably a dozen or more squirrels cavorting through the yard this evening, and countless birds swooping around. Blanche gave sufficient heed to the wildlife to know where they were and no more. She was wearing her vest, so she was working. Thus she did not care about the animals until and unless she needed to alert Athena to some danger they presented. She stayed at Athena's side and surveyed the area.

Take that vest off, though, and Blanche would be one-hundred percent doofy Goldendoodle.

By the time everything was set up, the sun was low and golden, reflecting a bright path over the lake. Sam started a fire while Athena went to the kitchen to season some raw patties and collect the supplies for a simple dinner of burgers and potato salad. She brought down a six-pack cooler with three bottles of Stella for Sam and three cans of Diet Coke for her.

They sat in Adirondack chairs facing the fire and the lake beyond and ate the little meal they'd made. Blanche got to share in the meal, too; Sam had grilled her up a plain burger.

This was why Athena had told Hunter not to come up tonight. She didn't want to be a girlfriend tonight. She wanted to be a best friend. She wanted to be calm and peaceful with the one person in all the world who made no demands on her, had no expectations of her.

She looked over at her best friend, who'd finished his three burgers and now was resting back in his chair, his head upturned and his eyes closed. She knew he was listening to the night sounds as they began to rise. He'd told her how much he loved the sounds of night creatures, and he'd tapped out the rhythm of the whippoorwill's song on her palm once, to try to give her some semblance of understanding. She still didn't really understand, but she loved to watch him like this, at real peace, truly enjoying a moment. He'd been struggling with that for the past year or so, and this week had been particularly hard on him.

Athena leaned back and looked up as well, focused on the night sky. Her father had been born on the day of the moon landing and had thus been named Neil Armstrong by his astronomy-buff father. Gramps had passed on his love of the stars, and of mythology, to his son, who'd passed them on to Athena. They had a really nice telescope that they took into the country sometimes to spend hours of the night studying the sky.

On this new-moon night, deep in the woods, she could look up with only her eyes and name an array of constellations: Pegasus. Andromeda. Delphinus. Aquarius. And more. Not to mention the planets in full view: Neptune. Saturn. Jupiter. What a magnificent thing the sky was. How many marvels and wonders it held.

Athena and her dad had been avidly following the images arriving from the James Webb telescope since its launch. Each image was astonishingly beautiful and just plain astonishing. She always felt something like vertigo when she first saw a new image, or if she studied any image for a long time. The

sheer vastness and fullness of space was a lot to get one puny human mind around.

She absolutely believed there was life beyond Earth; how could there not be? How completely arrogant it would be to think that in all that vast, elaborate fullness, only humans evolved the capacity for reason and invention? Humans weren't the only species *on Earth* to have evolved such capacity; studies had shown multiple species of animals to be problem solvers and tool users, just as studies had shown that many animals had real emotions as well. Some birds, like corvids and parrots, held actual grudges and vendettas. Dolphins were capable of meanness and spite. Many species could demonstrate kindness for its own sake. *Of course* other planets in other galaxies had been created with the right chemistry to support life; *of course* life had evolved on such planets. At its foundation, that was all life was: the right mix of chemicals evolving over time.

Thinking about space made Athena feel simultaneously insignificant and powerful, overwhelmed and hopeful.

Sam's fingers brushed her arm, and she looked over. He was smiling. "You look so happy," he signed.

She smiled back—actually, she realized she'd already been smiling. "I am."

"You want to get a blanket and go down to the dock? Get the trees out of the way?"

Her smile grew so much she could almost see her own cheeks. She nodded. It would be impossible for her to count how many times over the years they'd lain together on a blanket under a wide night sky and looked up at the stars. Sam knew how much she loved them, and he loved them, too—probably he loved them because she did, but that was okay. He always asked her to tell him which constellations she saw, even though he knew the big ones himself.

This was why she hadn't wanted Hunter here tonight, and she knew it was why Sam had told Lark to come tomorrow, too. It was a best-friends' birthday weekend, and this was the first part of their celebration. For them alone. The party would

be fun, and she'd be glad to have Hunter here tomorrow, but this night was the highlight for Athena.

When everything was perfect and she could trust that nothing would ruin it.

~oOo~

The next morning, Athena woke to the sensation of being shaken. She opened her eyes to a sunny room—*ow*—and a large Goldendoodle sitting at the side of the bed, pushing her shoulder with a paw.

When Blanche saw that Athena was awake, she went to the door, nosed the knob, and turned to her. Either there was something going on, or Blanche wanted something, outside the door.

“Potty?” Athena signed, and Blanche gave the alert that meant, essentially, *yes*.

Athena grabbed her phone to check the time. After eight. Of course the dog had to pee. So did she. Like a lot. Her pee place was on the way to Blanche's, so she got firsts. She tossed the covers back and let Blanche from the room.

The cabin was bright and quiet, and it smelled of coffee. Sam was an obnoxiously early riser, so he'd probably been up for two hours or more, though they'd lain on the dock last night until well past midnight.

Athena ducked into the big bathroom and did a quick pee, then let Blanche out and stood on the screened porch to watch so she'd know when the dog was ready to come in. The first thing she noticed was the blue roof of the canopy tent, on the beach near the dock. They hadn't put that up last night, so Sam had done it this morning already. The boy was all about responsibility and had probably done a dozen other chores while she'd snoozed the morning away.

He wasn't working now, exactly. He'd pulled the punching bag from the shed and was beating the shit out of it beside the

big pine tree. It looked like he'd been at it a while; he wore only a pair of black basketball shorts, and sweat ran down his broad bare back in thick streams.

He saw Blanche and called her over for some love. Since the dog wasn't wearing her vest, she went and dropped to the ground to give Sam her belly. Athena smiled as she watched them love each other.

When the moment was over, Sam stood. He turned and grinned when he saw Athena on the porch.

It was ridiculous how much bigger and stronger he was than her. Being born ten weeks early and barely cooked, and having an array of related health issues, especially during her key years for development, Athena had always been tiny. She'd stopped growing about a quarter inch before she hit five feet. If she weighed herself immediately after a Thanksgiving-size dinner, she *might* hit ninety pounds. A stiff breeze could push her around. She got mistaken for a child all the time and would probably still be getting carded when she was old and grey.

Sam, on the other hand, was six-two and almost two hundred pounds. He'd done physical work since he was a kid, and he had the muscles to show for it. When they went to an amusement park or a fair, someplace with a lot of people and a lot of walking—which meant a lot of Athena getting run into—invariably he'd end up carrying her piggyback for the last hour or two, with about all the effort he put into wearing a backpack. And he could literally rest his arm on her head—which he did, with great enjoyment, when he felt she needed some humbling.

Athena was tiny, but she wasn't helpless. Her father was a Bull and her mother a private investigator, who was also a black belt in Krav Maga. Athena could shoot handguns and rifles with accuracy, and she was green belt in Krav Maga. She'd wanted to go higher, but her size was an issue, and she'd finally gotten frustrated and stopped trying to advance. At some point, it didn't matter how tough you were if your opponent was three times your size and could toss you aside

like an unloved Care Bear. She still worked out the skills she had, though.

“Good morning, Frodo!” Sam signed. “Sleep well?”

“Yep. You?”

“Pretty good. I think I got the last jobs done, so the morning’s ours. You want to swim? It’s still quiet out there, so this would be a good time.”

He meant that there weren’t a lot of people on the lake yet. This was Labor Day weekend, so the area was crowded with people eking out their last summer hurrah. Later today, when their own party was hopping, the lake would be crowded with boaters, skiers, and swimmers.

Athena swam all the time in their pool at home, but she’d never been able to really swim in this lake; it made her mother far too anxious about what she wouldn’t hear coming. While the other kids got to dive off the back of the boat, or swim far into the deep water, Athena had never been allowed to do more than wade, like a little kid. That anxiety had been a little bit contagious, too, so she hadn’t tried it even after Mom couldn’t stop her. But now she had Blanche *and* Sam to keep her safe.

Blanche was coming up the porch steps, so Athena let her in. Then she turned back to Sam and signed, “Yes! Swimming please! When’s Lark coming up? Noon, like Hunter?”

He was walking toward the cabin, but he answered as he went. “Around then, yeah.” He checked his watch as he climbed the steps. As he came through the door, he grinned and signed, “That gives us more than three hours to ourselves. Let’s do this!”

~oOo~

It. Was. *Awesome*.

To be honest, they played in water up to Athena’s chest most of the time, just horsing around, splashing each other,

chasing a beach ball around, but they did swim out into the deep water, too. It was cool and had a fascinating feel around her legs, as if it were thicker than the water in their pool.

They put Blanche in her service-dog water vest, and, being half golden retriever, she was utterly gleeful as she paddled around keeping her ears on the job.

About an hour or so after they'd first waded in, Blanche alerted that she wanted to go back. It was not a good idea to ignore a service dog's alert, so they made their way onto the little private beach around their dock. Blanche continued to alert, even doing the thing Athena thought of as 'herding.' She wanted them to go back to the cabin.

"I think somebody's here," Sam signed, squinting toward the cabin. From here, they could see only the roof and part of the screened porch.

Athena nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

They gathered up their towels and the six-pack cooler they'd filled with bottled water and a big bunch of grapes, and they headed back to the cabin, lake water squelching from their swim shoes with every step. Such a weirdly wonderful sensation.

As they topped the rise, Athena sighed. Lark was the one who'd arrived early. She was sitting at one of the picnic tables, typing something on her phone. A floral hardside carry-on suitcase, a few reusable grocery bags, and a large bakery box sat on the table beside her. Sam had put her in charge of the cake.

Lark was really pretty, with long, layered blonde hair and big blue eyes. Athena was a little jealous of her looks, especially her body. She was tall, like five-eight or so, and curvy in the Marilyn Monroe way. Nobody would ever mistake her for a child.

She was always done up perfectly, like she was ready for her closeup—which she probably was. Lark was Extremely Online and had thousands of followers on TikTok and Instagram. Her sparkly phone hardly ever left her hand.

She must have heard them coming. Either that, or Sam had called out to her, because she looked over her shoulder, saw them, and got up from the picnic table—and immediately crossed her arms like she was mad.

Seriously? Already? Athena sighed again.

As they approached, Lark looked Athena over and seemed suddenly even madder. She turned to Sam and, as she began walking toward them, said, “I’ve been texting you for twenty minutes. Where have you been? What were you doing?”

She was angry and her mouth was moving fast, but Athena understood the words she made. She looked down at herself to see what Lark had seen, but it was just her puny body and its random assortment of ancient surgery scars, most of which were showing because she had on her old yellow two-piece. Her hair was back in a ponytail and probably looked like a rat’s nest after being in the lake.

On the other hand, Lark wore an adorable pink plaid romper with tied spaghetti straps and a sweetheart neckline that put her impressive cleavage right out in front. Her hair was done in a fluffy ponytail full of beachy waves, and her curtain bangs were styled to perfectly frame her prettily made-up face. She was also wearing pink ankle-strap espadrilles with about a three-inch wedge, which was silly. Girlfriend was going to sprain an ankle walking around here in those shoes.

Leaving the love-hate birds to their argument, Athena waved at Lark (who knew maybe two ASL signs, the ones everybody knew) and directed herself toward the picnic table. She’d take the cake and the grocery bags inside and give them their privacy. Though she couldn’t hear their fight and wasn’t looking at them, she knew that her presence itself would be a drain on them both.

When she saw the cake through the cellophane window in the box, she laughed with real amusement and only a hint of irritation. In blue icing across the whole of the basic sheet cake for their joint birthday was written: *Happy Birthday Sam!*

~oOo~

She set the cake on the table and put away the groceries Lark had brought—more Solo cups, napkins, and Chinet plates (which they probably didn't need), a six-pack of grapefruit White Claw, a party-size bag of tortilla chips, and what looked like the makings of some fancy take on salsa. She'd just turned to head back for a shower when the Sam and Lark came in. They looked like they'd talked things out enough to be good again.

Athena was trying to get Sam's attention to tell him she was claiming firsts on the shower when he looked down at the cake on the table, and she saw his face do the thing it did when he was angry and trying not to let it get the best of him.

When he spoke, he didn't sign as well, and he didn't make an effort to be sure Athena could see his mouth, but she saw enough to understand the gist. He was dressing Lark down for not including Athena on the cake.

That boy was very dumb about women sometimes.

Athena clapped to get his attention before he could get too far into the quicksand. When he looked her way she told him, "It's not a big deal. It's just cake."

"No, it's *not* just cake," he said and signed. "It's *our* birthday cake. For *our* birthday party. Which Lark obviously knows."

Lark glared at Athena and said something, but her lips barely moved, so Athena only maybe caught the word *keep*. However, whatever she'd said made Sam's face practically collapse in on itself. His fist even clenched.

Obviously, Lark hadn't been thanking Athena for coming to her defense.

As they started fighting *again*, Athena ducked out, and she and Blanche went back to the bedroom to collect clean clothes and get a shower.

~oOo~

When she was done with her shower, the cabin was empty and there was a note on the table beside the controversial cake. Sam's abysmal handwriting informed her that he and Lark had gone into town for another one.

That was probably going to be a really fun trip. Not.

Athena slathered sunscreen on, got a water bottle from the fridge, grabbed her tablet, and went with Blanche to sit in the yard under the trees and read.

~oOo~

Before she'd been able to finish a single chapter, Blanche alerted that somebody was here. Athena checked the time; it hadn't been even half an hour. Town was more than half an hour from the cabin, so if they were back already, things had gotten even worse. *Happy birthday, Samwise*, she thought as she turned to look around the back of her chair.

Hunter had just climbed out of his Accord.

Athena smiled. He was such a dork, trying to look all cool in navy Bermuda shorts and an untucked, pale-yellow Oxford shirt, Ray-Bans on his face and preppy boat shoes on his feet. Like he was headed to brunch at a country club and not a lakeside party where half the guests were Bulls or Bulls-adjacent and the other half usually saw him in his gym-teacher uniform, consisting of royal-blue knit shorts and a teal polo with the school logo on the chest.

She stood and headed toward him, waving to draw his attention from the cabin. When he saw her, he grinned. If he'd really been annoyed yesterday, he seemed to have gotten over it.

“Hi.”

“Hi, beautiful.” He reached her and slipped his arms around her waist. As he bent low to kiss her, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Hunter was the only person she’d had sex with and only the fourth she’d kissed. It was possible that, when compared against every sexually active person in the world, he wasn’t a standout, but in her sliver of experience he was an excellent lover all around.

“Where is everybody?” he asked when their greeting was over.

“Sam and Lark went to town for some supplies. Nobody else will be here for a few hours yet.”

He nodded. His eyes were moving all around, taking in the property. This was the first time she’d asked him up here. Actually, no. She’d asked him up last year, for their twenty-first birthday blow-out, and he’d broken up with her instead.

But she wasn’t going to think about that. The point was, he’d never been here before.

“You want a tour?” she asked.

“Sure,” he answered and pulled her close for another kiss.

Deciding to start with the best parts, Athena led him down to the lake first, with Blanche walking between them.

She and Hunter rarely held hands, and never for very long. She didn’t know if it was a typical thing for Deaf people everywhere, but she and Hunter felt the same way about it, and so did those friends she’d asked: having their hand held was like being gagged.

Even if she wasn’t trying to communicate, she got anxious when her hand was held for more than a second or two, and if it went on longer than that, she started to get sweaty and nauseated. It was silly; she could sign well enough with one hand, and she’d need only pull her hand loose to be able to communicate normally, but the anxiety was still there.

Her recurring anxiety dream was losing her hands. The situation varied, from simply looking down and discovering

that her hands had disappeared, to some kind of grievous injury, like having them sawed off or crushed. It was pretty fucked up. Her time in therapy predated the first instance of the dream, so she'd never talked to a professional about it, but she didn't really have to, did she? Her hands were the way she could make herself understood, make herself known. They held her very identity. Of course she'd be terrified of losing them.

"It's beautiful here," Hunter signed when they stepped onto the dock.

Athena nodded and looked around. The lake was already busier than it had been when Sam and she had been goofing around in the water, and it would get busier still as the afternoon deepened, but yes, it was beautiful here. Anyway, she didn't mind it when it got busy. She loved to watch the boats flying by, and the beautiful, foamy wakes they trailed.

"The boats are yours, too?" Hunter asked.

He meant the speedboat and the jet skis they'd pulled from the boathouse. "Not mine, the club's. But they're ours to use this weekend."

"So I can take out a jet ski?"

"Have you ever ridden one before?" Jet skis, like motorcycles, were a little dicey for Deaf folks—certainly not impossible, but it was more dangerous than other forms of travel and took some preparation and precaution. A weekend like Labor Day, at a busy lake, was probably a bad time for anybody to learn to ride a jet ski, but it was for sure a terrible time for a Deaf person to learn.

Athena had only ever ridden tandem on motorcycle or jet ski, and it had nothing to do with her deafness (well, it had a little to do with it, in the form of anxious and overprotective parents). She was just too damn little to control the things well.

Happily, Hunter was nodding. "My folks used to rent them when we were kids. They're fun."

“Then we should totally go out! But not until Sam and Lark get back. Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the place.”

As she and Blanche headed back up the hill toward the cabin, Hunter grabbed her wrist and drew her back.

“Wait,” he signed, smiling. “Come here.” He pulled her close, held her face in his hands, and kissed her dizzy.

“Thank you for asking me up here,” he signed when he let her go. “I love you so much.”

Athena smiled. They were always at their best when it was just the two of them. Was it like that with all couples?

“I love you, too,” she told him without any internal conflict. She wasn’t always sure whether she loved him or not, but right now, she felt it. She gave him what she hoped was a saucy smirk and added, “They’ll be gone for at least another half hour. Want to see our bedroom?”

Hunter laughed and kissed her again.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Sam pulled his truck up to the cabin, he saw Hunter's Honda and was actually relieved. Now Athena was paired off, and maybe Lark would chill out.

They'd argued most of the drive into town. He'd been fucking pissed, and fucking tired of constantly having to defend himself for having a fucking best friend, and defend Athena for being that friend, and manage Lark's insecurities because of their friendship.

Lark insisted that she'd simply forgotten to include Athena on the cake, but he didn't believe that for a second. She knew it was a joint birthday party, and when she'd asked if there was anything she could do to help, he'd suggested she could bring the cake. He'd done it so she'd feel more involved—and he'd been clear that it was supposed to be a joint cake for their joint party.

He didn't give a fuck about cake. He gave a whole field of fucks about Lark being shitty to Athena.

At least now Athena had a cake of her own. It was a much smaller, round, ready-made cake, but the frosting was yellow, her favorite color, and the actual cake was marble with custard filling, also her favorite. He'd asked the guy working the bakery counter to fancy it up and write *Happy Birthday, Athena* on it. Athena loved astronomy, so he'd had the idea to draw some of the constellations they'd gazed at last night for the decoration, even though the cake was the color of the sun. He'd had to show the guy the constellations on his phone, but then the guy had run with it, doing an airbrush kind of thing on the top, to make it look like a sparkling night sky, and then he'd done a great job drawing the constellations in glittery icing.

Lark had stood there with her arms crossed, glaring at the doughnut case, the entire time.

The ride back had been utterly silent.

But now they were back, and Hunter was here, so Athena would be focused on him, and Lark could see with her own two eyes, for about the fiftieth time, that she wasn't a threat. And maybe this whole birthday weekend wouldn't be fucked.

Sam parked alongside Lark's little Miata. Then he sat back and stared at the steering wheel. They had to get to a decent place between them before they went inside. As it was, he'd struggle to act like he was in a good mood, and in a few hours about two dozen people would descend on the cabin, looking to party.

"Can we get past this and be good?" he asked quietly, still staring at the steering wheel.

A sad little laugh came from Lark's side of the cab. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Sam sighed and looked over. "I don't know how to make you believe me that Athena isn't in our way. I don't know how to make you see she's not a threat to you, babe."

Lark answered while staring at her hands in her lap. "And I don't know how to make you see that she *is*. You pick her over me every time there's a choice. If she texts and says she needs you—even if it's not important—you jump." She finally turned to look at Sam. "You never tell her no, but you tell me no all the time."

"That's not true. I only go when it's important." Yes, he had bailed on Lark to help Athena out a few times, but only for something urgent. The last time, Athena's Fiat had broken down on the side of fucking I-44, and she wasn't able to get hold of either of her parents. She didn't speak, and not that many people knew ASL. She used her notes app and read lips to communicate with strangers when she didn't have anyone to interpret for her, but there were a lot of reasons that wasn't ideal. There weren't many options for help that could really help. Also, she'd been freaking out; he'd been able to tell by the tone of her texts. Athena was pretty tough for such a little chick, but sitting on the side of a busy interstate, her tiny car shaking suddenly around her every time a truck she couldn't hear coming went by, had had her freaked.

“She’s deaf, Lark. Sometimes she does need help.”

Lark scoffed at that. “You love her. I actually believe you honestly don’t see it, but it’s true. You love her.”

Jesus Christ. How many times were they going to have the same fight? “*Of course* I love her. She’s been my best friend since before I knew what the word ‘friend’ means. I love a lot of people, and none of them is your competition.”

“Do you love *me*?”

And there it was. Sam turned back to look out the windshield and the trees beyond. A squirrel, its cheeks packed full with nuts, ran to a tree and scurried up, disappearing into a hole to stash his haul for the coming winter.

“Sammy?” Lark whispered. The name he disliked shook as it left her mouth.

“I care about you. A lot.” He kept his eyes on the trees.

“But not love. Even after a year together.”

Now he turned to her. She was crying and trying not to, and he felt like a complete asshole. But he could not pretend to feel something he didn’t feel. “When things between us are good, I feel like maybe I will love you someday. But we fight so much, Lark. I think it gets in the way.” He owed her more, so he said the thing he was most afraid was true. “Or maybe I’m not capable of being in love like that. I never have been yet. Maybe I just can’t.”

That made her laugh through her tears, and Sam frowned as offense started to make a fuss in his chest. “That’s funny?”

Still laughing, but without a trace of humor, Lark shook her head. “Funny as in pathetic, maybe.”

“Why?” Now he truly was offended.

She shifted on the bench seat to face him. In the early days, she always sat right at his side, but for the past few months she’d rarely done so, and he was just realizing it as a change. “When I said you love her, I meant you’re *in* love with her.”

“What? No, I’m not. No way.”

“Yes, you are. She’s the first person you always think about.”

“Best. Friend. For my whole life. Remember?”

“You prioritize her over everything else. I think even if your club called when you were with her, you’d ignore it and stay with her.”

“That’s just not true. I’ve been with her plenty of times when I got called to the clubhouse. I *never* ignore that call.”

“But if she *needed* you, you would.”

Sam couldn’t say for sure what he’d do if he were honestly needed where he was when he got called to do something for the club, whether he was with Athena or Lark or anybody else. He’d never been in a position to choose one *need* over another. So he simply shook his head.

“Yes,” Lark countered. “Athena is the first person in your head and your heart. Everything else comes second.”

“She’s family. She’s like my twin sister.”

“*Like* your sister. She’s *not* your sister. Not really.”

Sam thought about how, when they were younger, their moms and aunts, and a few of the men, too, made a weird fuss about how they were ‘so cute’ together and what a sweet ‘couple’ they’d make. Athena and he had talked about it whenever it happened, and they’d both been grossed out by the very idea. It would be like incest.

They had never even dabbled in sexual contact. When they were kids and everybody was playing doctor or whatever, figuring out everybody’s parts, Sam and Athena had done nothing of the sort. It had never occurred to him, and as far as he knew—and he knew pretty far—Athena was the same. It didn’t matter that they didn’t share DNA. They’d shared lots of other stuff, including a playpen.

When Sam got lost in his head and didn’t reply, Lark asked, “Do you think she’s pretty?”

“I have eyes, Lark. I know she’s beautiful. That doesn’t mean I want to be with her like that.”

Lark stared at him for an uncomfortably long time. Then she wiped her face and took a deep breath. “I don’t believe I’m doing this. I wish you weren’t such a fucking good guy, so I could just call you a bastard and leave you bumbling around like an idiot. But even when you’re ripping my insides apart, you’re trying to do it kindly. Failing, but trying. And hell, maybe I can save the next poor girl from this. So.” She took a deep breath and put a finger up. “She’s your first priority in your whole life.” A second finger came up. “You know everything about her and go out of your way to make her happy.” A third finger. “When there’s any kind of tension or conflict between her and me, you come down on her side every time. She’s the one you protect and defend.”

Now her pinky went up. “Even now, while I’m sitting here crying while you break my heart and you’re sitting here feeling like an asshole for hurting me, you still say you love her and you don’t love me.” Finally her thumb. “When I asked if you think she’s pretty, you answered that you know she’s beautiful.” Her hand dropped to her lap. “You’re in love with her, Sam. I believe this really is news to you. Maybe you haven’t seen it because she’s always been there and it snuck up on you. But it’s obvious from the outside. I knew it almost right away, but you insisted it wasn’t true, and I liked you so much...” She sucked in a deep, fast breath. “I wanted it not to be true. Looking at you now, I think you want it not to be true, too. But it is. It’s not because you’re incapable of love that you can’t love me. It’s not because we fight. It’s not because I’m not lovable. It’s because you’re already in love and probably have been for a long time. I never had a chance.”

Sam knew he should say something. He should deny it and reassure her. But the way she’d laid out her evidence was fucking with his head. He’d never thought of his feelings for Athena so ... *clinically* before, and now it was as if he was thinking about it for the first time.

Was Lark right? Was the reason he’d always sucked so bad at romantic relationships that he’d already been in a romantic

relationship and hadn't fucking *known* it?

God, that would be terrible. He couldn't be in love with Athena. It would ruin everything. He'd lose *everything*. If he was in love with her—*no, no way, absolutely not*—he was alone in it. Athena loved him like a brother, as she expected him to love her. (As he *did* love her, dammit.) They were Frodo and Samwise, arms locked together against the trials of their journey.

In *The Lord of the Rings* it was Sam who'd fallen in love and gotten married while Frodo sailed off alone. But Frodo was inside right now with her boyfriend, and seeing as how he and Lark had been sitting out here for ten minutes without any sign of either of them, they were probably fucking right now.

The thought gave him a sour feeling in his gut—and now that he was thinking about it, that sour feeling was way too damn familiar.

Jesus. *No*.

“Yes,” Lark answered, and Sam registered that he'd said those two words aloud.

She reached across the cab and slipped her hand around his. “Here's the thing, Sammy. I love you. I've been in love with you for a while now. I think that's why I've acted like I have. I kept hoping and hoping that, when things got serious enough with us, your attention would turn more toward me. But that's never going to happen, and it's not because I'm not good enough, or I need to change something about myself. It's because your heart is taken. And I don't like who I've become while I've tried to wait for you to love me.” She squeezed his hand and let go, putting her fingers to her face to dab tears from her eyes. “I'm gonna go back to Tulsa. I'm sorry if this fucks up your birthday party, but I can't do this anymore, Sam. I deserve better. And you should tell Athena how you really feel about her. Because I think she's in love with you, too.”

Lark didn't come into the cabin to get her suitcase. Sam went up and got it from the kitchen, where he'd set it when she'd first arrived. As he'd figured, Hunter and Athena were in the bedroom Athena had claimed, doing exactly what he'd figured they were doing.

Nobody was louder than a Deaf person.

He snagged the suitcase and headed right back out of the cabin.

Crying again, Lark let him hug her goodbye, and then she was gone. Away from the cabin and out of his life. Another one bites the dust.

He immediately shut down any thoughts about love, or whether he was in love with his best friend, or whether he'd ever have a real relationship. It was something he was going to have to think about, but not now. Not this weekend. Not while he'd now be alone for the rest of the weekend while Hunter and Athena snuggled under the stars, under the sun, under the trees, in the water, in bed.

Happy fucking birthday.

Shoulders drooping, he went back inside to see if there was anything more that needed doing before the party.

Just as the screen door closed behind him, from the bedroom came a strained roar that could only have signaled Hunter reaching the goal. For all the things Sam and Athena had shared over the years, until now he hadn't been forced to share the sounds of her fucking.

Honest to God, nobody was louder than a Deaf person.

Athena barreled through the world slamming and stomping, but her actual mouth was quiet most of the time. She never made any intentional sound; she barely made noise even when she laughed. Sam had been around enough of her school friends to know that not all Deaf people were completely soundless, in fact most of her friends spoke, to varying degrees. But it was rare for sounds other than coughs or sneezes to come out of Athena's mouth. And even those sounded different.

Unless, apparently, she was fucking. Most of the grunts and gasps he now heard had a masculine depth of tone, but there were plenty of feminine noises as well. Not to mention the squeaky bedsprings and the headboard slamming against the wall.

If Lark had stayed, maybe those sounds would have calmed her. Maybe they'd have laughed about the PornHub situation happening on the other side of the wall. Or maybe not. Maybe it would have changed nothing, because it was *his* feelings Lark was focused on, not Athena's.

Was he in love with Athena? He couldn't be. He *couldn't* be.

Apparently she and Hunter were going for round two already, or Hunter hadn't gotten the job done yet, or something, because they were still grunting and groaning and gasping like they were on stage and projecting to the folks at the back.

Unable either to shut down or deal with the new, terrifying thoughts swirling around in his skull and the sound of the subject of those thoughts being thoroughly plowed by her asshole boyfriend, Sam went back outside. He'd go down and make sure the boat was in good shape. Or he'd find something else to do out of earshot of the cabin.

~oOo~

By four that afternoon, pretty much all their guests had arrived. They fell out in two main groups, their club family (and any partners or dates they brought), and Athena's school friends. Altogether they had close to twenty-five guests. The only no-show was Lark.

From the family, it was mostly 'cousins': James Mathews, who'd just started grad school and came alone; Anne Becker, who'd come back from Mizzou for the weekend (surprisingly leaving her twin sister, Emily, behind); brother and sister Quentin and Delilah Fitzgerald; Jake and his old lady, Petra.

Duncan came up on his own; Chris brought his girlfriend, whose name Sam was going to have to ask again; and Monty drove up in his billion-year-old minivan, carting five of the younger sweetbutts—and two kegs.

Sam's brother, Mason, had wanted to come, too, and he'd tried to make a case that being eighteen was legal enough. But after last year's birthday debacle, the last thing Sam needed was his little brother around as a witness to report to their folks. Mason was cool, as little brothers went, but he *was* a little brother. He was pouting about being left out, but he'd get over it.

In addition to Hunter, five of Athena's friends came; three brought dates and two came up together but not *together*. Luckily, Cherie wasn't among them. Sam and Cherie had dated for a few months. The especially ugly ending of that relationship had threatened to get in the way of Athena's work—Cherie was also a tutor at their school.

That relationship had been before he'd decided to prospect for the club. The trouble between them had been entirely about Athena. Another girl who couldn't believe their close friendship was entirely platonic.

None of his girlfriends had believed it.

And now Sam was wondering if they'd all been right.

No, he was *not* wondering that. At all. He wasn't thinking about it. At all. It was their birthday party, and that was all he was thinking about.

It was a noticeably smaller group than last year, and definitely more couples, but it was still chaotic within an hour or so of getting a full house. Everybody was outside, either down on the beach, over in the side yard playing volleyball or horseshoes, or in the water. Jay had taken the boat out with several people, and others were on zipping around on the jet skis, dodging all the other boaters and skiers on the lake today. Duncan had gotten the big speakers going, and Dirty Honey was currently blasting over the yard.

Sam kept himself busy at the grill, and was mostly alone except for when somebody came by for a burger or a beer and stopped to talk for a minute. They didn't stay long; Sam wasn't doing much to hold up his end of any conversation. He was not in the mood for his own party.

The whole afternoon had been shitty, and watching a bunch of his friends and family have a great time with their dates or their significant others did nothing to improve his sense of loneliness.

Watching Athena and Hunter play around in the water a lot like she and Sam had played this morning, except now Athena was wearing a different, new, much smaller bikini, did not help him keep his mind away from her and whatever he felt about her.

Until today, he hadn't known that Hunter was so jacked. Fuck that guy.

NOT THAT IT MATTERED, but fuck that guy. He was an asshole not worthy to clean shit off her shoes.

By the time a lot more people were coming by for food, Sam had more or less accepted the possibility that his feelings for Athena were ... complicated. More importantly, he'd struck upon a way to deal with it that didn't fuck anything up, and it was so simple he couldn't believe it had taken him hours of thinking (while telling himself to stop thinking): he'd simply ignore it.

As long as he didn't say or do anything about it, it didn't matter whether he was in love with Athena or not. As long as he proceeded as he always had, nothing would change. She had no need to know, and most likely would not want to know. Lark had said she thought Athena was in love with him, too, but that was crap. Lark didn't know Athena nearly well enough to make a claim like that. Sam did know her that well, and could say with authority that her feelings for him were sisterly.

For twenty-two years, their friendship had been perfect. They'd squabbled occasionally, but had rarely gone even a full day without working through it and being tight again. It was

the most important relationship in his life. He would open his own throat before he'd do anything to fuck it up.

“Hey, man,” said Derek, one of Athena’s friends who spoke. Sam looked over and gave him a smile and a wave.

Having his attention, Derek switched to ASL. “I saw a pontoon boat in the boathouse. Can we get that out?”

Sam and Athena had discussed that last night and decided to keep the party barge locked up. They were trying to stay off the radar as much as possible, and partying on the lake, the way they partied, would draw the attention of the water patrol—not to mention the high likelihood of somebody jumping off the thing for a swim when they could barely hold their head up. Or just falling off.

“No, we’re going to keep it out of the water for the party. Just the speedboat. And the jet skis.”

Derek was obviously disappointed. “Okay. No problem.” He nodded at the grill. “You want me to take over for a while, so you can enjoy your own party?” He grinned. “I’ve got skill at the grill.”

“I’m good, thanks,” Sam signed.

With a shrug and a nod, Derek turned and headed to the keg.

Fully aware that he was being a drag, Sam dropped some more raw patties and dogs on the grill and kept going.

At some point later, he felt a hand on his back and looked over his shoulder. Athena stood there, her long, dark ponytail wet from the lake. Her bikini was a tiny, blue-and-white check thing with string ties and little ruffles under her tits.

Don't think about her tits, asshole.

An equally wet Blanche stood panting at her side, strapped into her water vest and all business.

“How are you doing?” Athena asked.

When she and her fuckhead boyfriend had crawled out of their sex den and Sam explained that Lark had left, Athena had

hugged him and asked if he wanted to take a walk and talk about it. At that time, he couldn't have imagined anything more dangerous, so he'd said he was just fine and she should go play with her boyfriend. She'd done so, but since then she'd checked in with him every half hour or so, just like this.

"I'm good," he signed. "You hungry?"

She peered up at him with her dark eyes, trying to see if he was lying.

"Chill out, Frodo. I said I'm good."

"Excuse me for being worried," she snapped. Yes, you could snap in ASL. It was all about how you moved your hands and the face you made along with the words.

"Thank you, but I really am okay."

Athena responded to that by wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him tight, snuggling her head against his ribs.

At this particular moment, considering the hurricane going on in his head, she couldn't have done anything that hurt more or felt better. Sam squeezed his eyes shut and set his arm across her back.

When she stepped back, she told him, "You are the best human I've ever known. Somebody is going to see all the wonderful things you are, understand all the facets of your life, and fall madly in love with you without trying to make you change. She's out there, Samwise. I promise."

Sam swallowed hard. What if she was right in front of him? "Thanks. I hope you're right. But more importantly, you never told me if you're hungry."

She laughed in her silent, wholehearted way and punched him lightly in the arm. "Fine. I'll take a burger for Hunter and a dog for me."

He scraped the most burned patty up and dropped it on a bun for Hunter.

When Athena and her dog walked away, Sam went for another beer. He really wanted to get wasted tonight, but that

was probably a terrible idea.

CHAPTER SIX

Athena made her way back to the beach, where she found Hunter standing under the canopy, drinking another beer. He'd been drinking a lot today, and his mood darkened with each one.

The day had started off great, but now everything was sliding sideways. Lark had dumped Sam, so he was depressed. Hunter was annoyed that she was worried about Sam, and he also hated being here with so many hearing people.

The last one, she understood. She'd grown up in the chaos of the Bulls family, so it was natural to her, but it was certainly isolating, even when the hearing people were mostly fluent in ASL, as her family was. Still, most of them weren't signing unless they were conversing with one of the Deaf guests, and ... that wasn't happening very often. The only Deaf person most of Athena's family were engaging with was her.

The party had fallen out into two obvious groups, and the hearing people, the larger group, were hogging the boats and jet skis. Hunter was salty about it. He was salty about a lot today, and growing saltier by the gulp.

He stood under the canopy, separated from James, Delilah, and Quentin, who were engaged in conversation and maybe hadn't noticed he was there. Hunter had his back to them and was frowning at the lake. Out there Jake, Petra, Monty, Duncan, and a couple sweetbutts had the boat anchored and were swimming in the deep water. Athena didn't know who'd last taken the jet skis out, but they were nowhere to be seen.

She brought Hunter the plate she'd made him, with a burger and a mound of chips. When he thanked her and took the plate, she used her free hand to ask if he wanted to sit on the dock and eat. She took his answering shrug as a yes, opened the soda cooler—bummer, somebody had filled it with cheap-ass Vess sodas—and grabbed a can of strawberry. Then she led Hunter and Blanche onto the dock, where they plotzed and dangled their feet over the side.

“I’m sorry you’re not having a good time,” Athena signed.

Hunter shrugged again and opened another beer before he replied, “It’s not my birthday.” He gave his burger an irritated glare. “This is burned.”

“Sorry. You want me to get you another?”

“It’s fine.” He bit off about half of it and chewed petulantly.

Athena didn’t know what to do about his mood, so she focused on her hot dog and soda. Hunter sat beside her and ate his food and didn’t try to hold a conversation. He could get a good sulk going when he wanted, and he was obviously working on one now.

After a few minutes, she tried again. “We could play volleyball. Or horseshoes. Or there’s a bocce game we didn’t get out yet. Or we could go back in the water. There are floats in the boathouse.”

Another fucking shrug. “I’m good.”

Athena gave up. She finished her food and got his attention. “I’m going to go find something fun to do. Want to come?”

When he shook his head, she climbed to her feet and left him to his sulk.

She’d felt like she loved him earlier in the day, but that feeling had definitely waned.

~oOo~

She went back up to find Sam, but Chris was at the grill. Chris wasn’t very good at ASL, but she managed to get him to understand that she was looking for Sam, and he gave her the regular body language for he didn’t know: a big shrug with his hands lifted.

This birthday party could bite one. Seriously. This was worse than last year. Yes, last year’s party had been broken up

by douchebags with badges, and a couple of people had had WAY too much to drink, but at least it had been fun until then.

Maybe it was time to stop with the joint parties and just go off and do something jointly. Of course, whoever they were dating next year would probably have a snit if Athena and Sam went off alone somewhere. Sigh.

There were fewer than thirty people here, which was tiny for a Bulls party (which this kind of was), and they had a whole lakefront property to roam, but Athena still had to weave around a bunch of drunk dorks who had no idea where Sam was—or no idea how to understand her question.

She finally found him all alone behind the cabin, sitting on the woodpile. He had a beer in his hand and his elbows on his knees, looking like Sad Keanu. He heard her approach and looked up, but he didn't smile. In fact, she almost got the sense that he wasn't glad to see her. But that never happened, so she figured she was merely picking up his overall gloom.

As she was wearing her brand-new, super-cute two-piece, she wasn't keen on climbing up to sit beside him on a bunch of splintery chopped logs, so she stood in front of him and hooked her hands over his hairy knees. Sam had very little hair on his chest—none on his chest, actually, but some dark fuzz on his belly—but his legs were like Sasquatch, and his forearms were pretty hairy, too.

He met her eyes. Wow, he really was sad about Lark. Fuck her for hurting him like this. And today of all days!

“Was it because of me?” she asked. She shouldn't have, and she knew that. She was also pretty sure about the answer, though she didn't want it to be true. If it was true, maybe someday Sam would finally give a girl what they always seemed to want: Athena out of his life.

As a reply, Sam turned his head toward the lake and shrugged.

God, she was tired of all the SHRUGGING. She slapped his calf, and he turned back to her. As she started to ask him to tell her what was going on in his head, he grabbed her left

wrist with his left hand and turned it so the inside of her arm was up, and so was his.

At about the same place on her forearm and his was the same tattoo. They'd gotten them for their eighteenth birthday: the quote "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us," in the Hobbiton font.

It was a quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, spoken by Gandalf. At the time they'd gotten the ink together, the quote itself hadn't been particularly important to them, but the source had been. LOTR had been their first fandom together, and they'd started to call each other Samwise and Frodo after the first time they'd seen the movies. They'd watched the films together first and then, when they were a bit older, they'd read the books—and then all the other books. When they'd decided to get ink together to commemorate their friendship, they'd instantly agreed to get a quote from the trilogy, and then they'd gone looking for a good one—but not the quote everybody with an LOTR tattoo got. Besides, neither of them were really wanderers. Especially not Athena, who preferred her bubble of family and school.

They'd picked a good one, one that resonated more as they grew older. But Athena wasn't sure why Sam was so fascinated by their four-year-old ink now. His thumb brushed back and forth over her arm, as if he could feel the ink there and was trying to understand it.

She ducked so she could catch his eye and signed with her right hand, "Talk to me, Samwise."

His chest and shoulders swelled as he sucked in a deep breath. When he let it out, she felt the breeze of it over her face. It smelled of beer. He looked past her, over her shoulder—and then, abruptly, he dropped her arm.

His gaze shifted to focus on her. Without signing, he mouthed the words, "We have an audience."

Athena looked back and saw Hunter. He stood at the corner of the cabin, his arms crossed over his bare chest. Once he was sure he had her attention, he turned sharply around,

sidestepped when that dramatic motion threatened his balance, and stalked unsteadily off.

Jesus. Everybody was such a fucking diva today.

Hunter could wait. He'd been a pill for hours now, and he was too drunk to have a reasonable discussion with anyway. Besides, Sam was the one who had reason to be in a bad mood.

"I don't care. I'm worried about you. Talk to me."

But Sam shook his head. "He's obviously pissed that you're back here with me. If you're not careful, you'll be in the same boat I am. Go deal with him. I'm fine."

"If Hunter can't deal with me wanting to take care of you when you're sad, he can fuck off."

Sam stared at her for so long Athena had time to wonder if he was drunker than she'd thought and had fallen into a fugue state of some kind. Eventually, he signed, "I don't need you to watch over me. I just want to be alone."

She was really worried now. He was acting very unlike himself, and she didn't want to leave him alone to maybe do something stupid. "No—" she started, but stopped when he grabbed her hands and pressed them together between his own.

He used his mouth to tell her, "Go. I don't want you around."

Athena snatched her hands from his. He'd never said anything like that to her before.

"That really fucking hurt," she told him. "Fine. Sit here alone and pout. But if you do something stupid I will kick your ass for it."

Then she turned and walked away.

As she got to the cabin, she looked back. He'd crossed his arms over his belly and dropped forward to put his head on a knee.

If she ever saw Lark again, Athena was going to kick her right in the twat.

~oOo~

Athena was in bed before midnight on the night of her own birthday party.

But she was just completely over the whole thing. Sam had taken the boat out on his own sometime after dark. Hunter was passed out in an Adirondack chair by the campfire, and most of their guests had paired off and found somewhere to enjoy some games for two players, as it were—which was what she'd figured she and Sam would be doing with Hunter and Lark by now!

She'd found Hunter sprawled unconscious in the chair and grabbed a camp blanket to drop over him, so if he got left out there overnight he'd at least stay warm after the fire died. It got chilly in these woods at night even in summer.

Then she went inside, brushed her teeth and washed her face, brushed the dried lake water out of her hair, and put an end to this night.

She hated wearing underwear to bed; waking up with a wedgie was the worst. Usually she wore only a t-shirt to sleep. In her room, she stood for a minute and stared at the door, wondering if she should lock it. There were a lot of drunk people around tonight, and any one of them could bumble in here in a stupor and drop down onto the bed with her. That would be seriously awkward if she was basically naked.

But Hunter might wake up in the middle of the night, and irritated as she was, she wanted him to be able to get to bed if he did. So she left her underwear on. Gross.

Blanche settled into the pad of blankets Athena had made for her on the floor at the side of the bed as Athena got under the covers and turned out the light. She closed her eyes and tried to erase this dud of a birthday from her mind.

At least it wasn't her actual birthday yet.

~oOo~

She woke abruptly with a massive weight pressing her down into the bed, face-first. The pillow was puffed around her face, so she could barely breathe. After an initial blast of unfocused shock and fear, she remembered about the party and calmed a little—she still couldn't breathe and now she was angry instead of frightened, but she felt like she knew what was happening. Some drunk had done exactly what she'd predicted and dropped into bed for a drunken coma. Right on top of her.

In this position she couldn't get any leverage with her eighty-seven pounds, but she gave it her best shot. But then something truly scary happened—whoever was on top of her started to counter her fight. They weren't letting her up; they were trying to keep her down.

It wasn't a mistake. Somebody was on top of her on purpose.

Was it Hunter?

Really struggling now, she managed to get an arm free and push the pillow down enough so she could breathe and see. The room was almost pitch black, only the party lights outside the single window offering any light. It was too dark to sign, but she did it anyway, in the hopes that it was Hunter, or somebody who knew ASL and really was making an honest mistake, and he'd be able to make out her pleas to stop.

Lifting her head as much as she could, she took a deep breath. She never used her mouth to communicate, she had no solid idea how to shape words that way, but she could scream. She thought she could scream, at least.

With that breath, she caught the scent of Hunter's cologne. It was a custom scent from a company he'd found online, so she knew it was him. He wouldn't hear her if she screamed.

It was her boyfriend, and he was doing this on purpose. So he must think she wanted it. He was drunk, so she could understand him getting confused. He'd never done anything like this before, but he didn't get drunk with her that often, since she didn't drink much.

She had to get him to understand that she very much did not want this. Flinging her one free arm back, she tried to hit him or grab him, but she couldn't make good contact. She was so fucking little! Her Krav Maga training was no use because she was on her belly in bed, buried under his twice-hers weight.

Oh god, he was tearing her underwear off! *Hunter, NO!* she screamed in her head. *NO NO NO!!* Where was Blanche? She wasn't a guard dog, but she was trained to be alert for trouble, and this was trouble!

Athena gave up trying to grab Hunter and instead used her arm to try to wedge her upper body upward and free the arm that was pinned under her chest. Just as she succeeded, Hunter tore her panties away and spread her legs. He was not stupid. Even drunk he had to know she didn't want this!

Taking the risk that she'd be smothered, Athena let her head and upper body drop again, and she flung both arms up from her shoulders and over her head. She got two handfuls of his hair and pulled as hard as she could.

Then the most horrible thing yet happened. Hunter grabbed both her wrists and held them together in one of his hands.

He was raping her. With intention. And there wasn't a single fucking thing she could do to stop him. It didn't matter that she knew Krav Maga. It didn't matter that the man on top of her said he *loved* her. She was getting raped anyway.

She fought the whole time, but it didn't stop until he was done. When he came he bit down on her neck so hard she thought he might have taken a chunk. Like a fucking animal.

Then he rolled off of her and went instantly still beside her. Passed out.

Athena lay there in shock and horror for a few minutes. She was sore from fighting, and from his rough entry, but the only part of her that felt actually injured was the side of her neck. And the whole of her psyche.

When she could move, she let herself roll off the side of the bed and land on the floor. Blanche rushed over at once, agitated and alerting all over the place, so yes, the dog had known something was wrong but, like Athena, had been unable to do anything about it.

And nobody beyond that door had come to help. Had the whole thing been too quiet to be heard? What kind of noises had been made while her boyfriend fucking *raped* her? Or was the music so loud it drowned them out?

It was too late for help, so Athena gave Blanche the sign for 'all's well,' and the dog settled at once. Athena sat against the wall, under the window, and stared at the rim of light around the closed door. A whole party full of guests. Her family and friends. Her best friend. Not one of them had been a help. She had no idea if anyone had even been near enough to hear, or if there had been anything to hear.

Never had her deafness been more isolating than in this moment.

~oOo~

Athena sat against the wall and stared at the door for hours. By the time the night lightened and became dawn, she'd made some decisions.

First, Hunter was dead to her. Obviously. The second he woke up, she was telling him to get the fuck out of her life and stay out. They worked together, or at least in the same place, and there was no way in hell she was giving up her job, but she meant to tell him to quit, and if he didn't she'd report what he'd done.

That might be an empty threat, though. Because second, she had to make sure Sam didn't find out about this. Or any of

her family. Sam would kill him for this, literally, and most likely painfully and messily. Any of their family would—Jesus, what her father would do to him!—and she couldn't be responsible for that. Not because she cared if Hunter lived or died—just now, she'd happily kill him herself—but because he wasn't part of their world. He was a civilian; he had a family who loved him and would demand answers about his disappearance or death. Civilian deaths put Bulls at risk. And Hunter's father had pull in Tulsa, so the risk was all the greater.

Not because of her. No way.

Third—and this was the worst—she had to come up with a story, because the bite on her neck was sore and throbbing, and Sam would notice. That meant she had to pretend they'd merely had rough sex. The thought nauseated her, and the teasing she knew she'd get maybe forever made her want to tear her hair out, but after hours of thinking, it was all she could figure: she had to pass it off as a particularly intense hickey.

But if she was careful about the way she told her made-up story, and how much of it she told, she might be able to fold in a breakup as well. Not just rough sex. Break-up sex. Angry sex. She had to make sure all the gun-toting men in her family who knew (and those butts gossiped more than any woman, so eventually they'd all know) thought it had been consensual.

God, she really was going to be sick.

For the first time since she'd rolled out of bed, Athena got up from the floor. She rose to her feet and went out of the bedroom. As she hurried to the bathroom to puke her guts out, she registered that there wasn't anybody around—nobody conscious, at least.

Except for the dog at her heels, she was alone.

~oOo~

While she was puking, she had a new idea. After she cleaned herself up and examined the bite on her neck—only two spots

of barely broken skin, very little blood, but wow, a lot of bruising—Athena padded to the kitchen. Three couples were passed out in various sprawls around the living room. Monty's bare ass was draped over one arm of the nearest sofa, and a naked sweetbutt named Dani was passed out with her legs over his shoulders. The whole scene was gross and upsetting right now.

Ignoring all that, she went into the ransacked kitchen and took her knitting out of a cupboard. She'd tucked it in there so none of their guests would get any drunken ideas with it. Then she returned to the bedroom and closed Blanche out of the room.

Hunter was sprawled on his back, naked. His stupid cock lay limp on his thigh. She pulled her long metal knitting needles from her tote and went to the side of the bed. Using the needles like chopsticks, she lifted that disgusting worm and gave it a pinch and a tug. When that didn't wake him, she let it drop—gross, it was getting hard—and instead poked it with the sharp tip of a needle. Just a little. Not enough to draw blood. Yet.

That didn't wake him, either, so she poked his balls instead.

That got his attention. He flinched, and his eyes popped open. When he registered that she had a stainless-steel knitting needle pointed at his man parts, he jerked himself to a seated position and dropped both hands over his crotch.

Protecting himself, he couldn't communicate. When she didn't make any words, either, he finally, eyeing her warily, lifted one hand to ask, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Still pointing the needle at the part of him she hated most, Athena tipped her head to show the bruise on her neck and signed, "You raped me last night."

"What? I did not! What are you ..." his hand slowed and stopped, and she knew he was remembering. If not everything, at least enough to make him rethink his denial. But then he managed to make it worse: "Maybe I *surprised* you, but it

wasn't rape. You're my *girlfriend*. It's not rape just because you weren't into it."

Rage made stars in her vision. Athena jabbed the knitting needle at him and made him flinch hard. "It. Was. *Rape*. You asshole!" With one hand, she began to sign everything she'd drafted in her head. "This is what happens now. You get dressed and get the fuck out of here. You make sure I never see your stupid face ever again. That means you quit your job immediately." His eyes went wide at that and she saw him ready to argue back, but she shook her head firmly and said, "One more word out of you, and this needle goes straight through your nutsack."

His hand dropped at once and joined its mate over his crotch.

Athena returned to her rehearsed speech. "You quit *immediately*. Because if you don't, I won't go to the cops. I won't tell the school. I'll tell my family."

Any thought he might still have had to defend himself stopped right there as he went completely still. Athena thought he'd even stopped breathing.

"Imagine what my father will do to you if he ever finds out. Not just him, and not just Sam. All the Brazen Bulls, who all love me, will take turns on you. And they're big on giving people a taste of their own medicine."

She didn't know if that last part was true, but it had the desired effect. Hunter had gone grey and sweaty.

"I was really drunk last night," he finally signed. "If I was too rough—"

"SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP," she signed, so fiercely she was practically punching herself in the mouth. He shut up, then sat there looking naked and pathetic. Still had a hard-on, though.

Had she thought she loved this guy? Even possibly? What a joke.

She jabbed the needle at him again, and he flinched so hard he almost went off the other side of the bed. "Get dressed

and get out. If you're in that building when I go to work this week, I will tell my family everything.”

~oOo~

After Hunter was gone, Athena went back to the bathroom and threw up some more. Then she took the hottest shower of her life and scrubbed herself raw.

But she didn't fucking cry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam woke groggy and so lethargic he wasn't sure he could sit up. At first, he thought he was merely hung over—he hadn't gotten stupid drunk yesterday, but he'd mixed his alcohols, so he'd earned a bad morning. The next minute, however, he remembered about Lark, and about Athena and the new muddle in his head about what she meant to him.

Oh. Right.

He wasn't merely hung over. He was fucking depressed.

Closing his eyes and pulling the pillow over his head, he tried to go back under, but he gave it up after a few minutes. He had to piss, and anyway, the sun was bright. Though the cabin was quiet now, people would be moving around soon, and he was going to need a few minutes and some coffee before he could pretend to be in a good mood.

He got up, stumbled to the tiny half bath off this bedroom, drained his pipe for what felt like an hour, splashed some water on his face and rinsed his mouth out. Looking in the mirror, he sneered at his reflection. His stupid short hair pointed in all directions.

Filling his hands with water, he wet his head and tried to calm the chaos. Then he shuffled out of the room to get some coffee start—

As soon as he opened the door, he smelled coffee, and heard sounds of cooking. Somebody was already up and making breakfast.

It was Athena. She stood at the counter, flipping pancakes on the big electric griddle. A baking tray on the stovetop held a stack of about a dozen. The oven light was on, and he could see another tray with two similar stacks of pancakes warming in there.

She was cooking to feed everybody at the lake, not just everybody who'd spent the night here.

The weirdest thing: she wore a black hoodie and jeans. The morning still had a touch of the night's comparative cool, but it was definitely not hoodie weather. And she was cooking over a hot griddle.

Athena ran cool generally, but Sam could see sweat running down her neck, behind her ear. Tendrils of sweaty hair stuck to her skin.

He also saw a dark red bruise flowering on the side of her neck. It looked like a hickey—the biggest hickey Sam had ever seen, but a hickey. She and Hunter must have had a wild night.

Sam did not like Hunter because the asshole treated Athena like he had an irrevocable lifetime appointment to his position in her life, and then he broke up with her whenever he felt 'overwhelmed,' whatever the fuck that meant. Sam did not like Hunter because Athena tolerated that behavior from him, and she'd never tolerate it from anyone else. However, Sam had never been *jealous* of Hunter.

But he was pretty sure the sourness rolling through his gut wasn't just a hangover.

Looking back down the hallway, he saw the door to the bedroom she and Hunter had claimed was closed, so the asshole was probably still asleep.

Blanche lay on the rug in front of the fridge, watching Athena carefully. She didn't have her vest on yet, so she wasn't officially working, but she took care of her person regardless. When she saw Sam, she sat up, her tail wagging slowly over the rug, but she didn't come over for pets. She returned her attention to Athena.

"Something wrong, girl?" Sam asked, also giving Blanche her sign for 'trouble?' The dog looked at him briefly, whined softly, and looked to Athena again.

Something was wrong.

He crossed the kitchen. When he set his hand on Athena's shoulder to let her know he was there, she jumped with such violence she might literally have come off the floor. She

swung the spatula and would have hit him with it if he hadn't seen it coming and ducked out of the way.

"Sam!" she signed, panting. "Sorry! I'm sorry."

"It's okay. What's wrong?"

She blinked, then shook her head. "Just deep in my head." She went back to her pancakes.

The pause with that blink had been a half-second long at most, but Sam picked up on it. If Blanche's worry hadn't already piqued his, he'd have known from the blink something was wrong.

Athena and Sam did not lie to each other.

Well, he might be currently considering keeping the truth from her if he really was in love with her, but that didn't count. That was trying to keep their friendship whole.

A bit warily now, he tugged on her hoodie sleeve to get her attention again and signed, "No, something is wrong. Tell me, Frodo."

Her dark eyes quivered with emotion. "Hunter left. We broke up last night. For good, this time."

If Hunter was gone for good, Sam wouldn't be sad. But he was sorry for her—wait. If they broke up, when did she get the hickey? Also, did that really count as a hickey? It was a bruise the size of his fist, and there were actual *toothmarks*. From the orientation of those marks, he could tell that Hunter had been behind her.

God, Sam really did not want that image in his head. But now it was there, and he couldn't stop looking at the bruise. It was deep and large. It had to be painful.

He'd never seen a hickey on her before. Hunter was the only boyfriend she'd ever had, and he'd never marked her like this before.

She noticed where his attention was and tugged the hoodie up to cover the bruise more. Her whole body sort of clenched as if she were trying to pull the bruise inside. "Break-up sex," she signed.

There was no one in the world Sam knew as well as he knew Athena. Not even the members of his blood family. It took him approximately two seconds to put the evidence together and decide that Hunter had hurt her—not just the bruise itself but whatever he'd been doing when he'd bruised her.

Something so bad that a couple that had been loving on each other all day yesterday were suddenly over, and Athena was standing over a hot griddle in a hoodie and jeans, on a summer day with a forecasted high above ninety degrees.

Oh shit.

If he was right, he was going to hunt down Hunter Cruz and make a visual inventory of his organs.

He grabbed her arm. Worry propelled the movement with more force than he'd intended, and she jumped hard again and jerked away.

Sam didn't apologize. "Tell me what happened," he signed.

"I *told* you. We broke up."

Athena was tough, but she wasn't stoic. Her face was extremely expressive and showed all her emotions. ASL was more than hand motions; it was a full-body language, and facial expressions were important definitional and contextual elements. Thus, her face was almost never at rest. Now it was full of turmoil, and Sam grew more certain by the second that she wasn't merely sad over the end of a relationship. She was traumatized.

When she tried to turn back as if those fucking pancakes were more important, he grabbed her chin so she couldn't turn from him.

She responded by squeezing her eyes shut—her way of shutting down a conversation she didn't want to have.

So he signed "Tell" on her body, tapping her chin just below her lips.

Her eyes still squeezed tight like a stubborn little kid, she shook her head.

He signed “Tell” again. And again. And a fourth time.

Then Athena did some Krav Maga move and broke away from him. She spun toward the door and bolted from the cabin. As Blanche tried to follow, the screen door swung shut and bopped her on the nose, but that slowed her down for only a second. She pawed the door and ran after her girl.

Sam turned off the griddle and the oven and ran after them both.

He wouldn't ask again. If Athena couldn't talk about it yet, that was okay. He didn't need her account to know what that asshole had done. But he couldn't let her go off on her own.

He would be there for her, wherever she was.

~oOo~

He found her sitting cross-legged at the end of the dock, her arm over Blanche, who sat beside her. Feeling his steps on the dock, Athena looked over her shoulder, then back at the lake again.

He sat beside her and dropped his legs over the edge.

She glared at him but didn't make any words.

So Sam did. “You don't have to tell me. I know. He raped you.”

She looked away again—and again made no words. And that pretty much settled the question, didn't it? Motherfucker.

Sam wasn't particularly violent. He could count on his hands the punches he'd thrown in anger. He'd been in plenty of recreational fights, and he handled himself well, but he didn't have the bloodlust a lot of the men in their family had.

Not usually. At present, bloodlust churned through him. He looked at that bruise, saw the marks where Hunter's teeth had

dug in, and the image that exploded in his head threatened to take the top of his skull off.

They sat side by side, staring at the lake. It was still early, and the water was calm. Later it would be choppy with the wakes of dozens of boats, but now the scene was empty and tranquil. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the trees around them, and morning birds sang the world awake. The faintest hint of gasoline laced the air, from the boats that had traversed the lake throughout the previous day. Sam had always liked that scent, a memento of a good day.

On any other day, it would have been a beautiful moment. On this one, Sam resented the peace. This weekend had absolutely sucked.

What a stupidly insufficient thing to think.

He wasn't sure how long they'd sat at the end of the dock, not talking or looking at each other, but it was a while. Then Athena slapped his arm lightly, and he looked over. She stared up at him, her eyes wide and pained and serious.

“You can't tell anyone. I mean it, Sam. Nobody.”

He'd known, but to have it confirmed was a machete straight through his chest.

The idea she'd want to let that piece of shit *get away with it* needed some discussion, because no fucking way. But now was not the time. The last thing she needed right now was to keep arguing.

Then he almost asked if she was okay, but what a fucking stupid question that would be. He could see that Hunter had hurt her, and he could also see that she wasn't limping or otherwise guarding physical hurt ... anywhere else. *That raping motherfucker!*

Sam seethed, but he didn't ask if she was okay. Of *course* she wasn't, but she didn't seem to need medical care, and he didn't want to put her in the position of having to tell him she was 'okay.'

Instead, he put his arm around her—carefully, ready to back off if she balked. She didn't, so he drew her close and

tucked her against his chest.

With his free hand, before he wrapped that arm around her as well, he signed, "I'm here."

Sam could feel the tension in her body, but for a long moment she sat quietly. Abruptly, she turned her head to bury it against his chest, and the tension running through her like an electric charge doubled. And then she was crying. Really hard.

Athena rarely cried. She hated how small she was, she hated being mistaken for a child, and she thought crying made her look even more immature.

These tears, mostly silent despite their intensity, just about tore Sam to pieces. He closed her up more snugly and she shifted until he'd almost encompassed her. He wanted to pull her onto his lap and wrap her up completely, but he worried that she'd take that as being treated like a child. So, as his own tears filled his throat, he held her as closely as he could and gave her what comfort he had.

He was going to fucking castrate that son of a bitch.

~oOo~

Hours later, Sam pulled onto the driveway and parked behind Athena's mother's Benz. The remnants of their so-called birthday party had frayed quickly once all those hungover people started stumbling around, and he and Athena had had the cabin to themselves by shortly after noon.

The plan had been for Sunday and Monday to be about the two couples, but now there were no couples. Only two best friends, both of them battered in different ways. There was no point staying until Monday.

Once they were alone, Sam tried to get Athena to talk a few times, but she was adamant, and when he realized that his pushing compounded her turmoil, he stopped. They finished cleaning up the property and putting everything back where it belonged without talking about anything but that work.

The drive back to Tulsa was similarly conversation-free, but that was normal. It wasn't possible to hold a complicated discussion in ASL and also keep one's hands on the wheel and eyes on the road.

Now, however, they were home, and he wasn't driving. He'd spent most of the day and all of the drive stewing about what Hunter had done, and his conviction had only grown deeper: Hunter had to pay. He could not hurt Athena like this and fucking get away with it.

Before Athena could start to sign anything, Sam jumped in. "I know you don't want to talk about this—"

She kicked the dash hard and slammed her hands together. Her hands sliced through the air as she signed, "I don't! I've told you and told you! You need to shut up!"

Lying between them, Blanche was calm but watchful. She didn't like the vibe.

"Athena, listen—"

She slapped his hands away. Hers flew wildly. "No! *You* 'listen'! It didn't happen to you, so you don't get a fucking say! It happened to me, and I told you what I want!"

"How can you expect me to know this and just sit by and do nothing? What kind of man would I be if I just shrugged and said, 'that guy *raped* the—'" He actually started to sign *the woman I love*—which was true, and they'd exchanged 'I love yous' since they were kids, but he was pretty sure he would have meant something very different now. He still needed time to work through the mess in his head, and even then, even if his feelings for her had shifted, he doubted he'd *ever* tell her. But he caught himself and instead signed, "'the most important person in my life, but oh well. Bummer, I guess.' How can you *want* that?"

"Why do you think *you* get to decide what happens? You pushing this makes you just another fucking asshole doing what he wants with me. Is *that* the kind of man you are?"

Sam let his hands drop to his lap. She was right. He was trying to force her to do what he thought was right. And worse

—he was making it about himself.

“You’re right,” he signed calmly. “I’m so sorry.”

Athena glared warily at him for quite a while before she let out a long breath and nodded.

“If you don’t want to answer this, I get it, but will you tell me why?” he asked.

She looked out the side window at her family home. She was so still, Sam wasn’t sure if she intended to answer, or what she intended to do at all. But eventually she looked at him again. Her eyes blurred with unshed tears as she began to sign.

“If you went after him yourself, you could get hurt or in trouble. If you needed backup, then my dad would find out, and I don’t want him to know it happened. I don’t want *anybody* else to know it happened. I don’t want to be the reason the most important people in *my* life get hurt or end up in prison.”

She was right; he’d need help. He had no idea how to hunt down and hurt—kill, he wanted to *kill*—a guy and get away with it.

“We wouldn’t,” Sam said. “The club knows how to get things done without trouble.”

Athena gave him exactly the look that ridiculous claim deserved. His own father had spent years in prison because he’d gotten caught in club trouble.

She’d already made her point, but she drove it home anyway: “I wonder what your dad would say about that.”

“Okay,” he relented. “Okay. But it *kills* me to think of him going about his life like it doesn’t matter what he did.”

Leaning over the dog, Athena picked up his hands and held them to her chest for a moment. She was telling him she loved him, that they were okay, in the most profound way she could.

When she let his hands go, she signed, “It happened to *me*. I didn’t get a choice when it happened, but I get to decide what happens now. I told him he had to quit his job immediately so

I never have to see him again. I told him if he didn't, I would tell my family what he did to me. So if he doesn't quit, I will have another decision to make, and we can have this discussion again. Okay?"

Losing a fucking job seemed like the lightest possible consequence, but it wasn't his decision.

"Okay," he signed.

"Promise me."

He didn't hesitate. "I promise, Frodo. It's your call. I'll follow your play."

Finally, she relaxed. She even almost smiled. "Thank you, Samwise."

Sam pulled her close and hugged her hard.

His chest was full of knives.

~oOo~

It was late afternoon when Sam arrived home. The sun shot deep golden rays across the roofs of the houses and other buildings, and shadows stretched long and skinny over the wide gravel lane. His mother was halfway between the house and the chicken yard as he pulled up and parked; she stopped and watched him, the egg basket cradled at her belly.

As he opened the door and jumped out, she called "Hey! Everything okay? You're supposed to be home tomorrow."

The truck bed was full of random party crap that needed to get put away in various places, but he ignored all that and strolled to his mom first. He needed a mom hug. "It was a shitty weekend."

Inside the house, Tank barked frantically. His person was home, and he couldn't get to him. But Tank and chickens were not a good mix, so he had to stay inside when they opened that gate.

“Aw, hon.” Setting the basket on the ground, she outstretched her arms, and he settled in with a sigh. “What happened, baby?”

He couldn’t tell her the really important thing, but he told her what he could. “Lark and I broke up. Athena and whatshisname, too.” The shithead’s name did not deserve to come out of his mouth.

“Wow. I’m sorry to hear that.” She kissed his cheek. “You want to help me get the eggs and talk while we do?”

“Sure.” Sad to lose the hug, Sam stepped back and picked the basket up. Getting the eggs was his brother’s job. “Where’s Mace?”

“On a date. He went to a movie with that girl from Pritchard’s.” Pritchard’s was a drive-up burger and ice cream stand in Grant that was a major hangout for high school kids and those who’d recently graduated (or dropped out) and weren’t quite ready to let it go. Mason fell into that second group.

Most of the couples Sam had known in high school had started off by flirting at Pritchard’s. Mom’s description didn’t narrow the field down much.

“He was really hurt you didn’t invite him this weekend, you know that,” she said.

He hadn’t wanted a narc at the party, but now he just felt like an asshole for making Mason stay home. “Yeah, I know. I feel pretty shitty about it now. I’ll talk to him.”

“Good.” Mom took the basket while Sam opened the gate.

Four dozen chickens hurried over, clucking happily. They got the good treats at egg-collecting time—overripe strawberries and other random rejects from the gardens. Reggie, the Welsummer rooster who lorded over this huge harem, stood haughtily at the top of the coop ramp like he didn’t care about strawberries.

Sam pulled the metal bucket from the egg basket and dumped the goodies in a big circle. The chickens cackled with glee and hurried over, running across his boots as they looked

for the perfect place to feast. Sam crouched and petted a few ladies. Their flock was mixed, and he loved all the different kinds of hens they had, but his favorites were the Orpingtons. Orpies were the Golden Retrievers of the chicken world.

With the hens sufficiently distracted, he and his mother went to the coop to gather up the eggs. With such a big flock, they collected twice a day and got a few dozen eggs every day. Those they didn't eat themselves got sold at their produce stand or the IGA in town.

Every one of these chickens had a name; Sam had named most of them himself. He'd been involved in raising them as well. Though they kept the flock for their eggs, not their meat, occasionally a hen stopped producing, or was badly injured in some kind of chicken-on-chicken altercation. At that point, they slaughtered that hen and ate a chicken they'd known.

It was definitely not Sam's favorite part of farm life. But Mom had named the chickens and treated them like pets long before he'd been around, and she'd taught him what he still believed: a gentle death after a gentle life wasn't a cruelty. These days, though he cried every time, he did most of the slaughtering. He'd gather up the doomed hen, cuddle her and talk to her for a while, and when she was comfortable and cozy, and he had her far from the flock, he gave a sharp, fast twist and broke her neck.

Mom did the plucking and dressing. That was more than he could bear.

"What happened with Lark?" Mom asked as she set a few eggs in the basket.

"Same thing that always happens." He sighed. He'd barely thought of Lark since he'd found Athena making pancakes for the entire population of Oklahoma. "It's fine. I'm not that broken up about it. Just ... you know. Kinda ruined the party."

"When you say the same thing that always happens, you mean ..."

Sam looked over at his mom. She should know what he meant—it was his fourth breakup of an actual relationship, not

counting several girls who'd noped out immediately upon meeting Athena, and they'd all ended for the same reason. It had always driven him batshit that girls were so threatened by a completely platonic relationship, but very recently he'd begun to wonder if they all weren't a whole lot smarter than he was.

"You know what I mean," he said to his mom.

"Athena."

"Yeah. Basically."

"Hmmm."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing. Just ... hmm. It's interesting."

He stopped with the eggs and gave his mother his full attention. "Interesting? What the fuck, Mom?"

She set the basket in an empty roost and leaned back against the berth. "I guess I sound cold, and I don't mean to. I'm sorry. But ... I mean this with deep love, Sam. You know I am always here for you, and I want you to live your life in the way that makes you happy. But I have to ask this: if every single girl you try to be serious with feels threatened by Athena, and you can't do enough to show them there's no threat, do you think there will be a point where it's time to consider if there *is* a threat?"

It took him a second to unpack all that, but it shouldn't have. It was what he'd been thinking for more than a day now, trapped alone and scared in his own head.

He couldn't talk to Athena about this, obviously, especially not now, but probably not ever. Could he talk to his mom? She'd been all creepy when they were younger, like Athena's mom, and all their aunts as well, calling them 'such a cute little couple,' when they were just kids. One particular instance that neither Sam nor Athena remembered, but there was photographic evidence: when they were four, their folks had gotten together and *dressed them as bride and groom* for Halloween.

The focus on them being a couple had always grossed him and Athena completely out. Hell, for all he knew, that creep factor might have been the reason they'd never considered each other as anything but a friend.

But Mom hadn't thrown attitude around when he'd started dating girls he *hadn't* grown up with from the crib. She'd rolled with it fine. They all had, actually, as if all the 'cute little couple' stuff had been nothing more than a family joke.

Could Mom be unbiased now? Could he trust that?

He dipped his toe into that water. "Lark said I'm in love with her. Athena, I mean. It was different this time—she didn't just yell that at me and throw a tantrum. She laid out a whole case like a lawyer."

Mom put the last of the eggs in the basket and gestured toward the door. They went out of the coop and then the yard. In about an hour, they'd close up the chickens for the night.

"And what do you think about that?" Mom asked as she latched the gate.

"I think I am completely fucked sideways if I'm in love with my best friend."

Mom stopped and looked directly at him, frowning. "Why?"

"Mom, come on. I lose everything if I'm in love with her. She's not in love with me, and it fucks everything up between us if our feelings don't mesh. I can't lose her. I can't."

The stresses of the weekend threatened to crack him into pieces. On top of everything, he felt like an asshole for whining about *his* shitty weekend when Athena had been *raped*. But he couldn't talk about that, and his worry for her and fury for what had happened to her had frothed all his feelings up so big and high he was choking on them.

Yes, he was in love with his best friend. Jesus Christ, he loved her so fucking much. And he felt utterly helpless and useless now, when she needed somebody strong and capable.

Mom led him to the picnic table and set the basket down. Then she pushed him to sit, and she sat beside him and picked up his hand.

Inside the house, Tank barked and whined. They had to get in there, or let him out here, soon, or he'd start tearing the door up.

But Mom didn't seem to notice the ruckus. "You will never lose Athena," she said. "You're family. If nothing else, you will always be family, and you will work through any trouble that might rise up between you. If you want her to be more than your best friend, the only way that can happen is if you take a chance and tell her how you feel. Personally, speaking as someone who's been close to you both as long as you've been alive, someone who's watched you together all that time, I think you won't be sorry to tell her once you see how she responds. But even if I'm wrong, I'm sure the worst thing that will happen is a little bit of awkward time and then things will settle back into place."

"How can you be so sure?"

"A bond like the one between you two is too strong and deep to break so easily. Whether it's friendship or something else, you two will always be in each other's life. Always. But Sam—if you *are* in love with her, and you don't tell her, if you try to pretend everything is the way it was, that ..." She shook her head. "It's not sustainable. You'll pine and grow to resent her dating other people. She won't know to be careful of your feelings. That could do real damage in time. Don't suffer in silence. Honor your friendship with honesty."

"I'm scared," he said. His voice failed him and it came out as a whisper.

"Oh, baby. You *are* in love with her."

Sam nodded—and then the lump of love, pain, fear, worry, and rage that had been pulsing in his chest for the entire day broke apart, and he barked out a sob before he got himself under control.

Mom pulled him close, and he rested his tired head on her shoulder.

“You won’t lose her. I promise. Be brave, be honest, and all will be well.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Athena's mother came in hard with a complex combination of jabs and punches. Athena blocked them all, but she couldn't get a turn in, and Mom drove her across the mat. If she got driven off the mat, Mom would win the spar. There was nothing riding on who won or lost their spars, except that the past few days, Athena felt like everything was riding on everything.

Why was she still training, anyway? It was pointless and stupid. She'd been doing Krav Maga since she was eight, and for what? So she could pretend she was tougher than she was? She wasn't even five feet tall and nowhere near a hundred pounds. Uncle Gunner called her 'fun size,' which was kind of creepy and not nearly as funny as she let him think it was, but he wasn't wrong. She was freakishly little. There was literally no martial arts move she could do that could protect her from a full-size asshole—and now she knew that for an absolute fact.

Angry at herself and the entire world, Athena lost her cool when she felt her heel teeter over empty space. With nothing to lose, she stopped blocking, stopped looking for an opening to start a combination drive of her own. Instead, she spun and delivered a back kick straight into her mother's gut—and she put all the force she could muster into it, as if she were in a match rather than a spar.

They were in full pads, but still Mom doubled over. Athena should have pulled up right then, but instead she drove forward, repeating the same combination of punches her mother had used, driving Mom back and back the other way. When she finished with a side hammerfist, Mom blocked it and then, her face tight with anger, she grabbed Athena and locked her into a rear standing choke.

With gloves on, they could only communicate with body language. Mom held on, the hold more like an angry hug than a choke, and gave Athena a few hard shakes. She was telling her to calm down.

But Athena was too amped up to calm down, so she tried to break the hold. Mom responded with a single-leg takedown and put her on the mat. Then she straddled her and held her arms down.

Mom knew, and understood, how much Athena hated having her arms constrained, so she didn't hold them down long. As soon as she released them, she made a sign that didn't need a full range of fingers: the sign for "Stop!" She really slammed the side of her hand onto her other palm, too. Emphatically.

Now that she had well and truly lost and the moment was over, Athena was even more pissed, but it all turned inward. Had she just been trying to actually *hurt* her own mother?

"Sorry," Athena signed. "Sorry."

Mom rolled back off of her and sat cross-legged on the mat as she pulled her gloves off. Athena sat up as well and did the same.

"I need you to do some communicating, starlight," Mom signed when her hands were free of the gloves. "Your dad and I aren't as stupid as you seem to think we are. Something is going on with you. Since the weekend."

She leaned forward then and pushed Athena's ponytail off her shoulder. Athena wore a snug fitness top that had a neckline so high it was like a mock turtleneck, but the top of the bruise still showed. Days later, it was twice as big as it had been on Sunday, though the colors had faded.

Athena tugged up on the neck of her top and drew her ponytail back over her shoulder. "I told you. We just got a little rough is all." Each time she told that lie was a splash of acid through her chest. But it was better than the truth.

Mom stared for a long moment. When she was ready to sign, she did so in the way Athena thought of as 'lecture mode,' with slow, exaggerated gestures and a very serious expression.

"Athena Estelle. I know you understand what I do for a living, because you used to work in my office. Collecting

evidence and understanding what it means is the first line of my job description. Here's the evidence I've collected about you lately: You came home a day early from a big birthday-party weekend you'd been looking forward to for months. During that shortened weekend, you broke up with your first and only boyfriend. There is a very large bruise on your neck that can only be called a 'hickey' if we are using the broadest possible description. The scabs in that bruise indicate that Hunter actually *bit* you, and that he was behind you when he did it."

At that point, Athena darted a glance around the gym. It was early on a weekday, a fairly busy time here, but out in the wild, ASL was almost as good as a secret code. Nobody was paying attention.

But Mom grabbed her bare foot and gave it a shake to pull her attention back.

"Since you got back from the cabin, you've been moody and hiding in your room when you're home. And now this spar. You fought like you truly wanted to hurt me—or hurt something, anyway. What do you think that evidence suggests to me?"

Athena sighed and focused on the gloves now in her lap. Sam always said she was a terrible liar, and obviously he was right. She'd been trying to act normal and had been failing utterly. She couldn't even keep a secret she was *desperate* to keep.

Mom lifted her chin to make her look at her again. Her parents—and Sam—did that all the time when she looked away while they were in conversation. It had never been something she liked, but usually she understood it. Right now, though, it was just another instance of somebody making her do something she didn't want to do.

So she closed her eyes. As long as she could remember, that was her way to end a conversation she was done with. And usually people left her alone, at least for a while, when she did. But on Sunday, Sam had signed "Tell me," on *her* mouth, and now she could feel her mother looming close,

probably trying to decide whether to physically wedge Athena's eyes open.

Getting raped by her asshole boyfriend had somehow incited a whole trend of people forcing her body to do what they wanted it to do.

But Mom didn't put hands on her. When Athena eventually opened her eyes again, her mother was sitting where she'd been and simply waiting. But as soon as she had Athena's attention again, she told her, "You know I will understand. You *know* I will. *Please* tell me what happened. Did Hunter rape you? Or did somebody else?"

Athena's mother had been raped at around the same age, and though her boyfriend—long before she'd met Athena's dad—hadn't done the actual deed, he'd set the whole thing up. What had happened to Mom was much more violent and horrific, and the damage it caused was the reason Athena had been born so early. And also the reason she was an only child.

Mom *would* understand, and Athena wanted to tell her more than anything. But her parents talked about everything. They told each other *everything*. Her father could not know about this.

There was no point in trying to keep up a façade she'd obviously never gotten into place. Mom would pry and snoop until she knew anyway. But Athena had to control the story as much as she could.

So she focused there. "Dad can't know. You can't tell him."

Mom had said she'd already figured it out, but she took the sidelong confirmation like another punch. She sat there, staring, her eyes frantic and filling with tears. Athena looked away before she started to cry herself. She hadn't cried over this since she'd sat on the dock with Sam, and she meant not to shed one more drop.

Mom scooted to her side and pulled her into her arms. Athena let herself be tucked close and comforted. It didn't fix

anything, but a few of the taut strings that had seemed to bind her heart so tightly it bled suddenly popped free.

When Mom leaned back, she signed, “I won’t tell your father until you’re ready for him to know. But I’ve never lied to him, Athena. He already knows something’s wrong. When we talked about it, I didn’t tell him my suspicion, because I agree, he’d want to fix it, and ...”

Athena couldn’t believe they were having this conversation in the middle of the freaking gym, but here they were, and it was too late to back out now. “He can’t fix it. Nobody can. And the way he’d want to fix it—I don’t want him to do anything to Hunter.”

“Because you don’t want to put him at risk.”

Athena nodded. “Hunter’s parents would sound an alarm, and his dad works with the mayor. Dad could get arrested.”

“I know. Does Sam know about this?”

“Yeah. He figured it out, too, because I obviously suck. But I swore him to secrecy and told him it wasn’t for him to decide what happens now.”

“And he agreed?”

“Not easily, but yes. He says he’ll follow my lead.”

That made her mom smile a little. “He’s a good boy.”

“The best.”

Mom’s shoulders rose and fell with a deep sigh. “I’m not going to ask details about what happened, unless you want to tell me”—Athena shook her head fiercely at that—“But I need to ask this: Did you get some emergency contraception?”

The question made Athena’s stomach do a somersault. She hadn’t. She’d been so stunned that it had happened and so tangled in the rat’s nest of her head, and then in something like denial as she focused on trying to act like everything was normal, that it hadn’t occurred to her for a few days. And when it finally did, it was too late. But Hunter was diligent about using condoms. He’d been drunk, and he’d forced

himself on her, so maybe he hadn't been so diligent that night, but Athena could *not* think about that right now.

Nor could she think about the half-remembered—or maybe only dreamt—feel of something trickling out of her as she'd sat on the floor that night.

“Hunter always uses condoms.” It was a dumb thing to say, and to think, but it was the closest thing to hope she had.

“Oh, starlight.” Mom started to sign something else but stopped.

If, in addition to fucking raping her, Hunter had also knocked her up, that would be gross and infuriating, but it wouldn't be an unsolvable problem. She had no qualms at all about getting an abortion. Unfortunately, Oklahoma was doing its damndest to rush back to the nineteenth century, arm in arm with Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri, the states closest and most familiar. Since the Supreme Court had overturned Roe, abortion was illegal in all four. The voters of Kansas had stepped up, though. She'd have to work out some logistics, but the question of what to do if she got pregnant had had an answer before it had needed to be asked.

She was almost certain she never wanted to be a mom, regardless. The thought of taking care of a baby she couldn't hear scared the shit out of her. Lots of Deaf women did it, but Athena couldn't imagine it for herself. Plus, could she even carry a baby when she didn't weigh as much as ninety pounds? She didn't want to find out the hard way that she couldn't.

“Okay,” Mom signed. “We'll deal with that if and when we have to. We both need to get to work soon, anyway. But I'm going to look into some things myself. If I can find a way to deliver some justice on that polished turd of a meatsack that does not put our loved ones at risk, will you consider that?”

Athena felt like the dumbest person in the world. Her mother was *awesome* at fucking over fuckers. There was *so much* she could do—a lot of it was legally grey, but it wasn't violent or actually illegal. She could do Hunter in a way that really hurt him without harming a hair on his pretty head—or putting anyone she loved at risk.

If she came up with a good plan, they might even be able to hold Dad off if he found out. In fact, that was a way Dad could help—he often did the tech stuff for something Mom was working on. Athena still didn't want him to know, but so far she'd done a terrible job keeping the secret. It calmed her a lot to know that, if he did find out, they could point him in a direction that didn't lead to his gun.

Athena had been thinking of her family as the Bulls, settling everything with blood. But her family was more than the club. Her parents had other, better skills.

They could really do something to make Hunter pay.

“Yes. Please. Please help me.”

Mom still looked close to tears, but she didn't like to cry, either. She pulled Athena close again and they both held on.

~oOo~

Athena's single threat—that Hunter quit his job and completely disappear from her life or face the wrath of the Brazen Bulls—wasn't revenge so much as self-preservation. She loved her job and didn't want to leave it, so he had to go. And he'd taken the threat seriously. He'd apparently emailed the headmaster of the school before the weekend was over, and when Athena arrived on Tuesday morning, the halls were full of gossip about why the most popular teacher in the Lower School had up and quit two weeks into the new school year.

Athena had blocked all his contact points on the way back to Tulsa that weekend, as soon as she'd thought to do it, so she had no idea if he'd tried reach out to her and worm out of quitting. He was gone, and that was what mattered.

However, everybody at school had known they were together, and several of her coworkers had been at the cabin for the party. They had heard the first iteration of her cover story: that they'd had a big fight and broken up that night. A few of her most gossipy work friends had taken the little bit they'd known and run with it. Thus, Athena had spent most of

the week fielding greedy demands for details and correcting ridiculous fictions. Gossip was so very gross.

Nobody made a fuss about her neck because they didn't know about it. Sam had helped her figure out an imperfect but minimally satisfactory way to cover it at the cabin (he'd simply tightened the string on her hood so it gathered around her neck), and she'd raided her mother's closet for some cute scarves to wear at work.

She'd tried covering it with makeup, but cosmetics were not among the tools she used well. She rarely wore more than mascara and never foundation. Her attempt to cover a bruise that was quickly claiming half her neck only drew attention to it. But scarves over the makeup helped.

On this morning at the end of the week, most of the gossip had finally waned. Olivia and Kenneth, the only two coworkers she legitimately counted among her real friends, checked in with her to see how she was holding up almost a week after what they assumed was a painful breakup (and they were halfway right), and Kenneth brought her a yellow coffee mug with a silly stuffed monkey in it. The saying on the mug read "A HUG IN A MUG," and it made her laugh.

The mug was cute and sweet, the attention of her friends was calming, but what truly made Athena realize she was feeling a little bit better was her mom. Letting Hunter get away with what he'd done with no consequence more than a job loss was an open sore in her brain. Sam had been angry that she wouldn't let him go after the asshole, and she'd wanted to say yes, rip his legs off and beat him to death with them. Beat him until his eyeballs fell out. Cut off his stupid, raping dick and feed it to the animals at the zoo. But any of that would have put Sam at risk.

Mom, though, of course! She could do all sorts of things to fuck Hunter up. Athena felt a little rush of power simply imagining the bloodless pain Jacinda Durham-Armstrong could inflict from afar.

She'd wanted to keep it a secret. She hadn't wanted anyone to know. She'd told herself it wasn't shame but worry

that had propelled that wish. But now, with both Sam and her mom in the know and in her corner, Athena understood that there was some shame, too.

Not for being raped, but for being weak. For not being able to do anything to stop it. And not being able to make him pay all that he owed.

She was getting some of her confidence back now, knowing that Hunter Cruz would pay. Not with blood, but with enough.

~oOo~

“Are you sure?” Athena asked.

Sean, an eighth-grade student she’d been tutoring since sixth grade, read the chapter-review question again. Then he nodded and signed again, “Cell wall.”

“Can you tell me why you think it’s cell wall?”

Sean looked at the chapter review page, then at her, then at the book again. “I just remember it.”

“Okay, let’s go back into the chapter and check your answer. Can you find where it is?”

“I got it wrong, didn’t I? It’s cell membrane, then.”

She smiled. “There are only two choices, so one of those is right. I didn’t mean to suggest your first choice was wrong. But any time you can’t say *why* something is right, that’s a sign that you should check and make sure you understand.”

Athena worked as a tutor for the middle-school kids, grades six to nine. Though she wasn’t yet a teacher and had only a diploma from this very school, she’d been working in the tutoring office long enough that the credentialed teacher who was officially in charge of the office had mostly handed over the reins to Athena so she could focus on her other job of being the Middle School’s roving substitute.

The office was small, with only three tutors. Each tutor had a desk where they could work with students individually. There were also two small ‘classrooms’ for group sessions. Each tutor was nominally a specialist in one or a few subjects—Athena was the go-to tutor for science and math—but really they were all generalists, helping out with whatever was needed. They worked regularly with students who consistently struggled in certain subjects, and they also worked with students who came in voluntarily for occasional extra help.

Athena loved everything about this job. She considered it part of her responsibilities to help students understand that different was not strange, and that their struggles with their schoolwork or any other facet of their experience here were very normal. The idea that there was one ‘normal’ way to be in the world, *that* was the strange thing. More than strange. It was a lie.

Different was not strange, but to be Deaf in a hearing world was to be always aware of your difference. The world was not arranged for diversity; the lie of normality pervaded every corner. Public spaces from skyscraper office buildings to the restrooms in Walmart were designed with one kind of person in mind—one kind of *body* in mind: one with four functioning limbs, five functioning senses, medium weight and height, fair complexion, and so on. Anyone who diverged from that so-called ‘normal’ would be inconvenienced, or actually harmed, or simply excluded. And most of those who fit the narrow parameters of ‘normal’ didn’t recognize the privilege in their conformity. They just assumed that *their* way of being in the world was *the* way to be in the world.

Athena had been to exactly three films in a theater, and those only recently, because theatrical films weren’t automatically captioned. She had to use a stupid device with a tiny screen to get captions. It would be nothing to simply caption all movies, but oh no, can’t even slightly inconvenience the folks who would pout about there being a few words on their movie—as if they didn’t watch with captions at home half the time anyway.

Everything Athena did in the ‘normal’ world came with a little reminder that that world did not make room for her. It bugged the shit out of her—and she wasn’t alone in that feeling. She and her Deaf friends complained about it often. Being different from the conventionally accepted ‘normal’ meant overcoming obstacles that had no reason beyond simple thoughtlessness to be there in the first place.

Lots of people diverged from ‘normal,’ in lots of different ways. The only reason certain people thought they could claim the title of ‘normal’ was that they had enough power to create the world to suit them.

But within the Deaf community—and for Athena that was school—the world was arranged for the convenience of people like her. Here, *she* was normal. She didn’t have to think about her deafness here because it wasn’t an issue. From roof to foundation, this was a school *for* the Deaf. Instead of bells, there were lights. Instead of choir, there was percussion class, with a special floor so everybody could feel the beat, and music classes that focused on rhythm and rhythmic signing. Instead of whistles in the gym there were brightly colored flags. The halls and classrooms teemed with service dogs, and the school had a small ‘dog park’ so they could do their business, and offered water and treats during meal times.

There were students here who had cochlear implants or hearing aids. There were students here who spoke, and each wing of the school—Lower, Middle, Upper—had a speech program to teach that skill. But being able to ‘hear’ in the way those devices approximated whatever hearing was, or being able to speak, wasn’t an expectation here, and it didn’t create a hierarchy. Hearing devices and speech were deeply controversial within the Deaf community, and the teachers and administration here presented them as the right choices for some but not all.

There were, of course, differences among the students here, and there were bullies and drama and infighting in every community. Deaf children were no kinder to each other than hearing children; in fact, they tended to be even blunter. But even kid-on-kid cruelty was a kind of normal.

Socially, Athena had been a middle-of-the-road student herself, neither especially popular nor a target for bullies, but as a tutor she went out of her way to identify the children who were sliding downward on the social ladder and give them some affection and attention, and maybe some advice when she thought she had any worth sharing.

As a struggling student, Sean was one of those children. Getting pulled out for extra help was as stigmatizing here as at any other school. Athena did more than simply drill him on the answers. She wanted him, and all her students, to understand *how* to learn, not merely what to learn, so he could build up some skill and some pride in himself and maybe start succeeding on his own.

He found the correct section of the chapter; his finger traced each line as he read. Then he slapped his hand on the page and signed “Cell wall! Because it’s a plant cell! Animal cells don’t have cell walls!”

“Very good—and you learned that on your own. Well done!” She held up her hand, and he gave her an enthusiastic five.

Being at work was the best therapy Athena had yet found.

~oOo~

“Tell your mom I want to help,” Sam signed. “Anything she needs, anything you need, I’m in.”

Sitting in her car in the school parking lot that evening, Athena smiled at her phone.

Smartphones were one invention entirely made for ‘normal’ people that had accidentally greatly improved the lives of people with disabilities. Suddenly, Deaf folks could communicate like everybody else did. Hardly any hearing person (well, any hearing person under the age of about forty, at least) used their smartphone to make actual, old-fashioned phone calls. Everything was text or video now, and video was pretty much only for close friends or work stuff—and all of

Athena's close friends and co-workers were fluent in ASL. She had table-top tripods at home and work and one of those dashboard holders in her car, so she had both hands free and could actually have phone calls.

Not to mention all the apps for captioning, text-to-speech and speech-to-text, and myriad other tools to make life easier. All hail Steve Jobs.

"You're a good hobbit, Samwise," Athena signed.

Strangely, a flash of melancholy went through Sam's expression, and then he looked down. When he stayed like that for a few seconds, she clapped her hands to get his attention again. He looked up and gave her a smile that, after a beat, seemed sincere enough.

But something felt off. "You okay?" she asked. "Your mood seems off."

"I'm good," he signed. "I don't want to talk about me. Nothing going on with me is as important as you."

"But I don't want to talk about my bullshit anymore. What's your bullshit?"

He smiled. "Okay. Maybe I'm in a little bit of a mood. I fucked something up when I was stocking new inventory, and Eight chewed my ass over it."

"I always knew Uncle Eight was kind of a lovable jerk, but since you've been prospecting, he seems a lot less lovable."

"Yeah. Dad says he just gets off on riding the prospects and I should try not to take it personally but ..."

"But it's hard not to take it personally when it's you personally getting abused."

"Not abuse. Just ... I don't know. It just makes me worry I'm not cutting it. It would suck to be the first legacy to wash out as a prospect."

"Do you regret doing this?" Athena definitely regretted it for him. He'd been happier before he'd decided to prospect.

Sam's eyes slid away from the screen as he contemplated his answer. The fact that he had to think about it might have suggested regret, but Sam was generally thoughtful, especially about important things. When he was asked what he thought about something, he considered his answer before giving it.

"I really hate being a prospect," he signed when he'd thought enough. "Everybody told me it was going to suck, and they did not lie. They also told me there was no way to understand how bad it sucked until I was living it, and that's also true. I hate every bit of this—except just working in the shop. That's fine." He paused and thought some more, then added, "But I sit there in the shop, watching the guys working in the bays, laughing and giving each other shit, coming in sometimes to laugh and give me and Monty shit. I work behind the bar in the clubhouse and feel the vibe there, and yeah. I want it. If I have to go through this bullshit to get there, so did all the patches. No, I don't regret it. I just have to survive and not fuck up so bad my own family gives me the boot."

"If you want it, you'll get it. I know you, Sam. You're tough and smart, and you're so good. You'll get what you want. You deserve everything you want."

He stared at her through their phones. He seemed fully sad now, and Athena wished she could reach through and hug him, let him lie in her lap so she could comb her fingers through his hair and rub his scalp in the way that always made him feel better.

"I'll be home in about twenty minutes," she told him. "Come over when you get off work. My parents are both busy tonight, so we can order in and take over the big TV. We haven't done a hate watch of *The Hobbit* for a while. We'll get pillows and blankets and make a fort and stay in our happy place all night."

Again, the sadness in Sam's expression deepened, when Athena had expected it to ease. He looked away. When he looked back, he signed, "That sounds awesome, but I can't. Mom wants me home to help ... do a repair in the stable."

He was lying. If her instinctual understanding of Sam hadn't been enough to be sure he was lying, he'd said in this very phone call, not ten minutes earlier, that he had nothing going on tonight and was probably going to hang out in bed playing Xbox.

Sam didn't want to hang out with her.

With a small few exceptions for their occasional squabbles over the years, she didn't think he had ever not wanted to hang out with her when he was free. And she knew for a fact he'd never lied about it. Why would he lie?

As she was trying to figure out how to respond, whether to let him have his lie or to call him on it, Sam signed, "Hey, there's somebody at the pumps and Monty's in the john. I have to go. Talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay. Hey—I love you, Samwise."

Sam flinched.

He *flinched*.

And then he ended the call.

Athena stared at the Sam-less screen for a long time. Something was going on with him. Maybe it was simply the stress of prospecting. Maybe her situation and his frustration at not being able—not being allowed—to do something about it was just too much stress on top of the prospecting stuff. But if it was that, why wouldn't he be honest with her?

Something loomed on the horizon, low and dark like a thunderstorm. Something that felt like it could sweep Sam away from her.

Despite her Funko Pop size, Athena could withstand a lot of shit. She'd been surviving unsurvivable shit since the moment of her birth. She was currently holding up pretty well, she thought, after being raped by a man who'd professed to love her. Her primary emotion about that was rage, and rage was extremely motivating.

But if she lost Sam?

No, she wouldn't survive that.

CHAPTER NINE

Sam was sitting at the table in his Sinclair uniform, halfway through his bowl of Honey-Nut Cheerios, when the screen door squealed open and his brother entered the kitchen. Mason ignored Sam as he went to the fridge to drink orange juice straight from the pitcher.

Mason was more than three years younger than Sam. He'd turned eighteen last December and had graduated high school this spring. As brothers went, they were pretty close. They bickered plenty and had their share of knock-down, drag-out fights, of course, but they always got over it. (Sam didn't count the times he'd punched Mason in anger in his total of angry punches because aggravating little brothers didn't count.) Mason had attached himself to Sam's hip when they were both still little kids doing little-kid chores around the farm. For the most part, Sam hadn't minded it. It had been pretty cool to be someone's hero, and he'd liked teaching Mason how to do shit.

It was cool until, of course, it wasn't cool at all. When Sam hit his teens and started wanting to hang out with school friends, he'd pushed Mason away a little. Just a little; just enough to make some room for himself. Mason had reacted to that badly, and since then, he'd developed a tendency for ratting Sam out. They'd gotten over what Sam thought of as The Big Pout as soon as Mason had also entered high school and begun wanting to hang out with other people too, but Mason still ratted Sam out when he thought he could get something out of it.

Thus, Sam had not wanted his kid brother at the cabin.

Now they were in The Big Pout Returns.

What a stupid thing to pout about. It was just a fucking party, and the whole thing had gone ass-up anyway. Sam didn't get why Mason was throwing such a bitch fit over it when they'd had pretty smooth sailing over the much bigger thing Sam had done to fuck Mason over: deciding to prospect.

He hadn't done it to fuck Mason over, obviously, but changing his mind about wanting a patch had certainly thwarted Mason's plans. Sam's brother had wanted a patch for as long as he'd understood what it was. He'd intended to apply to prospect the moment he was eligible: when he graduated high school.

It was unusual for the Bulls to accept a prospect so young. But Mason was a legacy, just like Sam, so he'd had a good shot, and Dad had never indicated any intention to get in his way. Not until Sam had decided he, too, wanted a patch. Now Dad said he wouldn't allow both his boys to prospect at the same time, so Mason had to wait.

Sam had expected Mason to go all the way off over that, but he hadn't. He'd simply grinned and told Sam to hurry his ass up.

But he was throwing a now two-week-long bitch fit over not being invited to a stupid fucking party.

Frankly, Sam had enough shit making a mess of his head right now. He had nothing left for Mason being a diva.

"You gonna pretend I'm not here?" he asked.

Still guzzling orange juice, Mason held up a middle finger.

"Fuck you, headass," Sam snapped.

Mason returned the pitcher to the fridge, wiped his mouth on his forearm, and turned to Sam.

"You don't want to be friends, we don't have to be friends."

"Fuck off, Mace. I told you why I didn't want you to come, and you know it's true. You're a fuckin' narc. Maybe if you hadn't ratted me out to Dad about the ticket last month, I might've overlooked all the other times you ratted me out. But you did, and this is what we call finding out after you fucked around."

"Maybe you shouldn't do sus shit at the cabin, and you wouldn't have to worry about getting ratted out."

Sam pushed his bowl of milk away. “Son, if I started calling out the sus shit you do, Mom and Dad would put a Master lock on your bedroom door and you’d only get an hour of yard time a day.”

“What the fuck is this, now?” Dad said as he came into the room from the main hallway.

Immediately regretting his words, Sam looked up at their father. He was dressed for club work, already in his kutte, and his chest seemed fuller—he was wearing Kevlar.

That fact swept away the apology Sam had planned. “There trouble?”

Dad shook his head. “Nah. Just working a security escort with Gun and Fitz, and the company we’re riding with had a spate of armed ambushes, so we’re going in prepared.”

“So it could be trouble,” Mason said. He’d come to the table and was standing within a foot of Sam. He glanced Sam’s way, and they shared a look. The potential of danger for Dad was enough to close the gap between them.

Dad dropped his hand on Mason’s shoulder. “I said there’s no trouble. Every day at any time *could* bring trouble, and that’s why we roll ready. But we’re not expecting anything but a ride. Yeah?”

“Yeah, okay,” Mason said.

Dad met Sam’s eyes. “Okay?”

“Yep. Understood.”

“So what’s goin’ on between the two of you?” Dad asked.

Sam and Mason shared a glance. Then Mason said, “Nothin’. Just a squabble. Not important.”

Dad considered them both for a beat before he let the matter drop. “You goin’ in soon?” he asked, nodding at Sam’s uniform.

“I’m on in about an hour.”

“C’mon,” he said. “We’ll ride in together.”

And that was a huge reason Sam had changed his mind about a patch: he'd grown up alongside his mother, but his father ... they'd lost a lot of important years with Dad. Sam wanted them back.

So did Mason, and hurt cramped his face. But Dad still had his hand on Mason's shoulder, and now he pulled him in for a quick, tight hug.

"Your mom in the field?"

"Barn," Mason said. "She's dressing Rollo's ass."

Rollo was officially Athena's horse. He was a small buckskin Quarter Horse gelding, pretty as a picture and sweet as candy. But dumb as a rock. He'd opened a gash on his ass the other day because he'd gotten lost in the pole barn and tried to push his way out the back. They'd had to call in the vet to stitch him up.

Their pole barn had only three walls. They had one in the main pasture to keep the water trough in the shade and provide good shelter during rain. Maybe he hadn't gotten lost, exactly, but nobody could figure out why he'd try to go backward through the corrugated metal wall instead of walking right out the open front, so they'd decided Rollo was exactly the kind of stupid who could get lost in an open room.

Sam hadn't told Athena that her horse had given himself another dumb injury. He hadn't talked to her as much as usual in the past few days. It hurt every time. For so many reasons. He knew she was hurt or confused or both, and he tried to smooth it over when they did talk, but it wasn't going so well.

It seemed Sam was as bad a liar as she was. At least when he was lying to her. Not lying, exactly. Evading.

But she didn't want his help to deal with Hunter, and he couldn't tell her about his shit without adding to her shit, so he didn't know how to talk to her right now.

"I'm gonna go out and say bye," Dad said. "Mace, I'll see you tonight. Sam, I'll meet you at the bikes."

He walked through the kitchen and out the screen door. As Sam and Mason both watched him cross the porch and make

his way to the barn, their earlier fight seemed obnoxiously stupid. He pushed all his uncomfortable thoughts out of his way and made this uncomfortable situation with his brother stop.

“I’m sorry I didn’t let you come to the cabin. I should’ve. I’ve been feeling like a butt about it since.”

Mason looked at him for a second. “Thanks. I’m sorry it turned out to suck—and I’m sorry I jammed you up over the ticket. I didn’t know it would get you in so much trouble.”

He’d gotten pulled over doing 109 on I-44 in the middle of the night. Because he’d been on his bike and wearing his prospect patch, he hadn’t gotten hauled in and had his bike impounded, but he’d gotten a very large ticket. Being a prospect paid nothing and working at the station paid minimum, so he hadn’t been able to afford the whole fine. He’d borrowed money from Mason—who had turned right the fuck around and told Dad about it.

Because Sam had been in that fucking prospect kutte when he’d been pulled over, Dad had been ... call it angry. He’d reported him to the club, and they’d fined him, too. He’d be paying that off for a minute.

So yeah, Sam had been pissed and hadn’t wanted his narc brother at his birthday party.

“Water under the bridge,” he said now. “I gotta go.”

“See ya,” Mason said.

~oOo~

As a prospect, Sam worked about full-time at the Bulls’ Sinclair station, next-door to the clubhouse. Most of the Bulls considered it grunt work and complained whenever they had to take a shift to fill in for the prospects and hangarounds who primarily worked the shop and the pumps outside. Every prospect he’d ever known had been eager for the day they could put the shop behind them, at least as their main gig.

Sam actually liked working the shop. It was familiar to him, not much different from working Mom's produce market. Most of the traffic in the store itself was from the neighborhood, and he enjoyed making small talk with the old ladies who came in for milk and bread, and the old men who bought tallboys and packs of cigarettes and sat outside the shop bullshitting all day. He especially liked the kids who rolled up on their scooters and boards and came in for snacks and sodas—though he'd learned early on that it was unwise to leave them unattended in the candy aisle.

He didn't even mind working the pumps. It was probably dumb, but he found it interesting to see so many different people doing their thing, living their lives. But his very favorite part of working the shop was listening to the guys in the bays. They talked all through the work day, and hardly ever about anything deep. Just giving each other shit, sharing jokes, talking out mechanical problems, whatever. Sam felt like he was getting a peek into what made the Bulls a brotherhood. Not in the clubhouse, where things were either very serious or very not, but here, where the Bulls were mechanics, doing regular work.

Though it wasn't a rule, officially, it was assumed that a Bull's on-the-books job would be at the station. It made sense; no other job would put the work of the club first. Subsection A of that not-rule was that a new patch would move on from the shop to the bays—that he would get certified and become a mechanic.

Sam was good with engines; most of the Bulls' kids were. It was probably impossible to grow up with these men and not learn at least enough about cars and bikes to keep one well maintained. But he wasn't all that interested in becoming a mechanic. He liked being able to handle his own repairs, but he didn't enjoy being hunched under a car's hood for hours at a time.

It wasn't half the pay the mechanics got, but he thought he'd be fine working the shop permanently. The real bank wasn't on the books, anyway.

He was crouched at the refrigerators, refilling the single-serve bottles of flavored coffee drinks (and marveling that people actually bought that swill), when the electronic chime at the front door went off, and he looked up to the nearest security mirror to see three neighborhood girls come in. They looked around in a way he'd grown to understand—an extremely unsubtle casing of the joint—so he left the half-full carton on the floor and stood up. Those three were unapologetic little criminals, always trying for the big candy score.

“Hey, ladies.”

They looked at each other before any of them responded. Arielle, the ringleader, smiled and popped a hip, as if her middle-school body had hips to pop. “Hey, Sam.”

“I just stocked out a bunch of bubble gum. And the Good Humor guy came this morning, too.”

“Strawberry shortcake?” Malika asked with real enthusiasm.

“Yup. And Creamsicles, ice cream sandwiches, and some new stuff, like Oreo and Reese’s.” He grinned. “If you promise not to try to pinch anything today, you can each have one ice cream on me.”

All three girls hurried to the ice cream case. Sam picked up the carton of coffee drinks and carried it to the counter so he could keep an eye on Ocean’s Three over there.

Then the back door opened and Maverick walked in. He hadn’t been working in the cramped office in the back, so he must have come over from the clubhouse.

The girls saw him and immediately began acting like they’d been caught doing something naughty. They clustered together and closed the ice cream case, empty-handed.

These girls were from the neighborhood and regulars at the shop. They knew the Bulls, and Sam had never seen them behave as though they were intimidated. Arielle’s dad, Malika’s uncle, and Carly’s cousin were hangarounds, and

Arielle's cousin was a sweetbutt. But these girls looked nervous to be so close to Maverick.

Curious, Sam considered Maverick. Maybe his perspective was skewed, having lived his whole life surrounded by—loved by—these men, but Mav didn't seem intimidating to him. He was tall, a little taller than Sam, and still visibly strong. He was somewhere around Dad's age, in his fifties or may pushing sixty, and he looked his age. His hair and beard were iron grey, heading toward stainless steel. He also looked like he hadn't lived an easy life. Definitely a leathery complexion. Lots of scars on his face, his hands. Elsewhere, too, probably.

Was that intimidating? Sam didn't know. Literally every Bull of that generation could be described in the same way. The only one who intimidated Sam was Eight, but that was because he roared like a hungry bear when he was angry or just felt like fucking with somebody. Mav was one of the nice guys.

But Mav didn't smile at the girls clustered protectively together. He walked by them as if they weren't there and came to Sam at the desk.

"I'm gonna go into the bays for a minute," he said as he approached. "Gimme a shout when you got a sec."

Sam swallowed. Shit. Was he in trouble? "Okay. Everything good?"

"Yeah. Just want to talk."

"Okay, I'll give you a shout."

With that, Mav turned and went to the bays. The girls stood where they were and watched him go. When the coast was clear, they ran to the desk.

"Are you in trouble?" Arielle asked. "We don't need ice cream."

He laughed. "You try to rob the place blind half the times you come in here, and now you're guilty about taking something you were offered? Y'all's ethics are wack."

"We don't want you to get in trouble," Carly said.

“I’m not in trouble. And I’m paying for the ice creams myself, so I won’t get in trouble. Don’t think of this as a regular thing, but go ahead and pick one.”

“You’re a good guy, Sam,” Malika told him.

“So they tell me. Go on. Try the Reese’s one if you want.”

~oOo~

“You haven’t spent any time in the bays yet,” Maverick said as he pulled a stool up and sat down behind the counter. “You thinkin’ about that? Your minimum’s about up—I’m not saying anything about a patch yet, but it’s been a year, and you haven’t asked to apprentice.”

Sam chuckled a little, and Maverick frowned. “That’s funny?”

“No, sorry. No. Just ... I was thinking about this today. I guess something’s in the air.”

“Or you’re thinking you’re about eligible for patch consideration.”

“Yeah, I am. But not really. Does anybody get patched at their minimum?”

“It happens. Not that often these days. But Zach didn’t go much longer than a year.”

Now Sam really laughed. “Yeah, but he’s that guy, you know?” Everything Zach Jessup did, he seemed to excel at immediately. It drove his brother nuts. Sam simply found it interesting to watch.

Maverick laughed, too. “Yeah, I hear you. But we’re talking about you. Fitz said he’s offered, and you turned him down.”

Fitz was Sam’s sponsor. Overall, he was pretty hands-off, but Sam knew he’d be there if he needed him. And yeah, he’d offered a few times to let Sam work with him and get some apprentice hours.

“I ... uh ... I don't think I want to be a mechanic.” Actually, he felt a little intimidated confessing that. “Would that be a problem?”

Mav considered him, letting his gaze hang there until Sam began to feel the need to squirm. “If it is a prob—”

“It's not. You don't have to be a mechanic. I want you working here, so we have you when we need you, but ... you want to work the shop? For good?”

“I don't mind working the shop. I think I'd prefer it to being stuck under a hood all day. I think body work like Dad does would be cool, too, but we don't get many of those jobs.” They got auto-body work so rarely that his father mainly worked on engines. But the highlight of the work Sam and Dad had done on his pickup had been making that crumpled old rust bucket showroom beautiful again. Working on engines seemed like work to Sam, but rebuilding vehicles was art.

“Tell you what,” Mav said, “work on an I-CAR cert. We get enough work to need a body specialist on the books, and Si's looking to slow down in the bays.”

“He is?” First Sam had heard of it.

“That's what he told me. Mentoring you might be a good transition. If you're interested. You could work here in the shop when there's no body work scheduled. Regardless, you should be thinking about it—and talking to your old man. More than half our time is spent doing straight work, so you should like what you do.”

Sam wasn't sure whether the subtext he heard in this conversation was real or merely wishful thinking, but his one-year was coming up in about a week. Then he would be officially eligible for a patch. And here was Maverick, VP of the Brazen Bulls and essentially their head of HR, talking about Sam's future plans with the club. Plans that were only relevant if he became a patch.

Monty, the club's other prospect, was coming up on his two-year mark. Though rarely the club voted to extend, two years was officially the maximum for a prospect. Not long

ago, Dad had told Sam that the club was reluctant to give up free labor early when new patches weren't absolutely necessary, so Sam should expect to go the full two.

But Maverick was sounding like maybe he wouldn't.

Monty would be so pissed if Sam got patched at the same time he did. But he'd probably say he expected it. He had a big speech, which Sam had heard multiple times, about the privilege of the legacy. Sam knew he wasn't wrong, but he'd celebrate an early end to the torment of prospecting just the same.

"I'll talk to my dad," he said.

Maverick grinned and slapped his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Good. Good. Gotta think ahead."

~oOo~

Toward the end of his shift, Sam had just finished taking care of old Mr. Watters and his thirty-year-old Oldsmobile and was heading back into the shop when a flash of blue caught his eye, and he saw Athena's Fiat pull into the lot. She didn't stop at the pumps but instead pulled to the side of the building, where they had a few parking spaces. When she got out, she was dressed for work. He would have said she was on her way home except that the station wasn't between her house and the school.

She was so pretty, in her slim black pants and soft yellow sweater. She had a scarf tied around her neck, and he knew what that was about. More than a week after the cabin, she still needed to hide that fucking bruise.

They hadn't talked as much as usual lately, and that was on him. He felt shitty about it, but he was such a snarl of confused feelings and new desires that it hurt, like *physically hurt*, to talk to her and try to pretend things hadn't changed for him. He needed time to sort himself out and get back to normal—or to wait until the time was right to tell her the truth. If the time could ever be right.

He felt especially shitty because she needed him. Literally the only thing she needed of him was to be her best friend and stand by her while she dealt with being *raped*. But he couldn't help but make it all about himself and his fee-fees. He fucking sucked.

Right now, though, she was here. So he put a smile on his face and signed, "Hey."

She did not smile, and she didn't respond until she stood right in front of him. "We need to talk."

Worst sentence in the world. When a girlfriend said that, the writing was on the wall. But Athena wasn't his g—Jesus. She wasn't breaking up their friendship, was she? That was the whole reason for his turmoil! Had he fucked up so bad he'd lost it while he was trying to save it?

"Okay ..." He swallowed and opened the door. "I got about twenty left on the clock, but Chet's not here yet, and the bays are closed, so we'll be alone inside."

She walked past him and into the shop. Sam followed her.

When they were behind the counter, Sam jumped up to sit on it. Athena leaned against the cigarette case and stared at him.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked, afraid to assume he knew. "You look upset."

"You tell me what's wrong. You've been weird all week."

"I don't know—"

She waved him off with an impatient snarl twisting her lips. "Don't lie to me, you butt. You are ghosting me, and that is some serious bullshit. What is your fucking problem? If you're pissed because I won't let you go after Hunter, I swear ___"

"No!" Sam jumped down from the counter as he cut in. "I told you I'll back your play. It's your call, and I get that."

She stomped her foot. "Then what?" Another stomp. "What?!"

He wanted to tell her. Mom said he should, and despite his real, deep fear that doing so would ruin everything, he wanted to tell her so damn bad.

But he couldn't, and it was more than fear holding him back. This was *really* not the time. Less than two weeks ago, Athena had been raped. By her boyfriend, a guy who'd professed to love her. What she needed right now was her best friend, not some asshole telling her he loved her, like his feelings were the most important thing. And how was she supposed to believe him if he *did* tell her, while she was still marked from the last guy who'd sworn his love?

Sam must have gone too long without responding, because suddenly Athena lunged forward and grabbed his shirt in both hands. She yanked on it as if she thought she could move him; then she let go and punched him instead. That sent his breath whooshing out and almost doubled him over; she'd aimed for his solar plexus, and the girl knew how to punch. Small but mighty.

She had a tattoo on that very point. Around her right wrist, ink like a charm bracelet, with three charms: the constellation of Virgo, a crescent moon, and a round charm with the tiniest letters Sam had ever seen inked that read 'FIERCE'—it was a reference to the quote from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Though she be but little, she is fierce.' Athena had a poster of that quote above her desk as well.

Thinking of her ink sent his eyes to his own left forearm, where he had a tattoo that matched another of hers, in the same place on her left arm: a quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: 'All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'

In this particular moment, that sentence, and the ink he and Athena shared, seemed particularly profound.

Before he could ask why she'd punched him, or make any kind of decision about what to do, she looked up at him with real worry in her dark eyes and signed, "Is it because of what happened?"

The most true answer would be that it both was and wasn't because of the rape. His feelings for her had nothing to do with it, but his turmoil now, and his shitty friend-being, was at least half because of what she was going through. But while he struggled to figure out a way to explain himself without saying too much and giving her something else to worry about, she asked something that changed everything.

She asked, "Do you see me differently now? Is that it?"

"No!" he signed at once. Then he grabbed her head, stared deeply into her eyes, and spoke the word. "No."

"Then I don't *understand*. I need you, and you're not with me."

"I am here for you. I am. Always."

"You're not. You haven't been since it happened."

He needed to explain, but what could he say? "I'm sorry, Frodo. I'm so sorry."

That wasn't good enough, and she shook her head. "Please, Sam. *Please*."

The only thing he could think to say was the truth. It filled his head and rattled at the bars of his conscience. "What if they're right?"

She frowned. "What? Who?"

"Lark and all the others. What if—" No. If he was going to take this risk, he had to *take* it. Own it. "I think they're right. I think the reason I can't find a girl who's okay with you and me is they're right."

"What are you talking about?"

His heart pounded so hard his eyeballs pulsed. "My head's been in a knot since Lark and I broke up. But it's not her I'm thinking about. She said some shit that's got me thinking about ... about everything. If I've been acting weird, it's not because I'm mad at you, or think of you as anything but amazing. It's not because of what happened to you. It's because I'm scared. I'm so *scared* about what I'm feeling, and what it might mean. I'm fucking terrified to actually say it. I don't know if there

would ever be a right time to say it, but I know now is the wrong time.”

He stopped and let his hands fall. Athena stood before him, looking up with that same frown, no indication that she understood where he was going—and that seemed a sure sign she didn’t feel the way he did.

But he’d come this far, so he went the rest of the way. “I think I’m in love with you, Athena. I think you are and have always been the only one for me.”

Her frown was replaced by shock. Eyes wide, mouth open, angry flush receding from her cheeks. She took a step back.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

“Sam,” she signed.

He’d made a monumental mistake.

He wouldn’t, couldn’t take it back, but he had to try to defuse it. “It doesn’t have to change anything. I promise I’m fine—I’m *excellent* staying as we’ve always been. I don’t need you to feel the same way. I won’t be weird about it, I swear. I just needed some time to—”

She grabbed his hands to stop him. She brought them to her chest and held them there, and for a moment, Sam knew hope.

But she let him go and stepped farther back. “I can’t do this. Not now,” she signed. “I’m sorry.”

And then she left.

Sam watched her hurry from the shop, out the door, around the building, and to her car. He watched her get in, start it, pull back from the spot, and drive away.

Then he reeled to the stool and dropped onto it.

He’d just destroyed the most important relationship in his life.

Once, eight or ten years ago, he’d asked Athena’s father about the time he’d been brazed by the club. The event was legend throughout the family, but Apollo never talked about it.

When he was asked, he either changed the subject or flat-out refused and told the asker to turn his nose to his own business. But that night, maybe because Sam's dad had been away in a Texas prison, and Sam and Apollo had been sitting out alone behind Sam's house, watching the fireflies and talking about guy shit, Apollo had told him the story.

Since that night, Sam's heart had held a little bit of fearful awe for the Bulls. For his family. The kind of awe one might hold for a vengeful god. They were capable of more than he'd realized, and not all of it was good. But the thing he remembered most about that story was the way Apollo had described the pain of being burned.

He'd said that pain could grow so huge it transcended the brain's ability to process it, and that was a mercy. When that point was crossed, the brain either shut down entirely, bringing unconsciousness, or it flipped the pain switch off, and sensation became like static.

Sam had understood the unconsciousness part but not the static. Now, though, he thought he had an inkling. Because he was sitting on the stool, staring out the window at the place Athena no longer was, and right at the point he thought his pain and regret would drive him screaming to his knees, his brain went utterly silent and took feeling with it.

CHAPTER TEN

Sweat ran into Athena's eyes and she swiped it away with a slap. As a scenic road in Costa Rica rolled by on the Peloton screen, she leaned in and picked up her pace. Blanche watched her warily from minimum safe distance.

The Peloton was her mom's, and Athena rarely rode it. She preferred to be actually outside. But this evening she was so upset she could barely stay in her skin, so she'd come down to their basement mini-gym to try to burn some agitation off.

Sam thought he was in love with her.

She was so furious and hurt and scared she could hardly think straight. How could he be in love with her? How many times had they been grossed out together over their family trying to make them a couple? It would be like *incest*, they always agreed.

How long had he been looking at her like somebody to fuck? While she'd been happily going about her life thinking how lucky she was to have such a perfect best friend and to have grown up with him from babyhood. Somebody she could be completely at ease with. Somebody who loved her without judgment or expectation. Somebody she could share the things she liked best with. Somebody who knew all her fears and frustrations and dreams. Sam knew things about her not even her parents knew. Things she would never have told Hunter.

The thought of that shithead sent such a shudder through Athena's body her foot slipped from the pedal grip and the loose pedal banged her shin.

That was the thing that stuck in her chest like a fence post: if Sam was in love with her, he was thinking about her in a sexual way. Wanting her. The past several years flipped through her brain, demanding a different understanding. Every time they'd lain side by side on a blanket, or on the roof outside his bedroom window, looking up at the stars, had he been *wanting* her? Every time they'd played around in her pool, or at the lake, in bathing suits, Sam picking her up and

throwing her in the water, had he been *turned on* to touch her body? Every time he'd settled his head in her lap so she could play with his hair and massage his scalp, had he been thinking of *fucking* her?

God, was she a target for Sam, too? Just a thing to want? To take?

No. Fuck, no! It couldn't be true! She could not lose him! Not her Samwise! It wasn't fair!

Something came up in her peripheral vision, and she jumped nearly clean off the bike. She would probably have fallen to the glazed-concrete floor except what had come up was her father, who caught her as she flailed. He lifted her from the bike—it was extremely annoying how easy she was to lift—and set her feet on the floor.

“What’s wrong, starlight?” Dad signed.

“Nothing,” she replied. “You just startled me.”

She swiped sweat from her face. As she did, she registered that it wasn't just sweat. Tears, too. And snot. Had she been *crying* while she'd pedaled?

“That’s a lie,” Dad told her, frowning. “And we don't lie in this house. You were vocalizing, Athena. Almost *screaming*. I came running down here because I thought you were hurt.”

Shocked, Athena stared at her father. She never tried to make sound, and she didn't like the thought of doing it without knowing about it. That was the main reason she'd resisted speech instruction and had ultimately decided not to speak—it freaked her out not to know what her own voice sounded like.

And now she saw the odd pull at the waistband of her father's jeans that meant he had a gun hooked in at the small of his back. He'd thought there was enough trouble that he might need to shoot someone.

“Sorry. I'm okay.”

Dad shook his head. “No, you're not. But you don't want to talk to me about it, I see. Is it boy stuff?”

She and her father could talk about a lot of things. When they took the telescope out on a good, clear night and spent hours mapping the night sky, they talked about politics and other things going on in the news, or Dad talked about his parents and how his father had loved the stars, too, and how much it meant that he could share that love with her, a family legacy to pass down. They talked about school and Athena's hopes for her life. They gossiped a little about family, too. And Dad was great at diffusing drama between Athena and her mom.

But no, she couldn't talk to her father about boys. He'd met Hunter several times, and he was civil, but he didn't try to pretend he liked him or hide his suspicion, even before there was a reason to be suspicious. Dad would have preferred Athena to become a nun or something, probably.

Absolutely she could not talk to him about what Hunter had done, or what Sam had told her.

Without thinking, she brushed her fingers over her neck. She wore a high-necked spandex top, but Dad noticed the movement of her hand, and he reached out to tug lightly on the neck, pulling it down. He stared at the remnants of the bruise.

"Mom told me you and Hunter broke up. Did he get too rough? Is that why?"

Athena was irritated that Mom had told him anything, but clearly she hadn't told him the worst part, so it was about as well-kept a secret as she could expect between her parents.

"I'm okay," was the answer she gave her father.

"Did he hurt you, Athena? That's the question I want an answer for."

Why was it so fucking hard to just keep something that happened to her to herself?

Honesty was one of the pillars of her family ethos. It had been drilled into her from the moment she was capable of understanding the concept. Honesty, loyalty, honor. Family, friend, club. It was impossible to lie to her parents.

If she stood here in the basement beside her mom's stupidly expensive exercise bike and told her father that her (extremely ex) boyfriend had forced himself on her—raped her—then her father would spin around and storm straight for Hunter, pausing only long enough to pinpoint his precise location. He would kill him painfully and then he would erase any sign of his existence.

Tempting.

But no. There was too much risk to her father. Far more risk than she could bear being responsible for.

But maybe there was a way to be truthful without telling the whole truth.

“Things got rough,” she signed. “I didn't like it, so I dumped his ass.” None of that was a lie, exactly. Just a slight spin.

Her father's jaw twitched, and tendons rose in his neck—and red began to rise under his skin, climbing up over his jaw.

Athena stood in place and watched him wrestle with his rage. All that for what he thought was consensual sex that had gone too far. She was right to keep the full truth from him. If he knew what had really happened, there would be parts of Hunter floating like ash over the city, and the Cruz family would be on every local media outlet begging for news about their missing son.

When Dad next signed, his gestures were slow and deliberate. “Is he leaving you alone now?”

She nodded. “I haven't seen or heard from him since I made him leave the cabin.” Another true thing.

“If he tries to contact you, you let me know.” He grabbed her chin and held it firmly for a moment. “Do you understand me, Athena?”

“Yes, sir. I'll let you know.” That was true as well. She would never want to be responsible for putting her father or any of her family at risk, but if Hunter didn't leave her alone, she knew she'd need help to deal with him.

“Is this why you were down here so upset?” Dad asked.

The truth was more difficult now. But Athena decided on, “I’m mad, not sad.” About Hunter, that was absolutely true. Anger was overwhelmingly her chief emotion regarding that situation.

Her answer made her father laugh. “That’s my warrior goddess.” He pulled her into his arms, and Athena settled into one of the greatest feelings in the known universe: being surrounded by the mighty arms of Neil ‘Apollo’ Armstrong. Her daddy.

Eventually the hug ended, and Dad set her back. “If you need me, you only have to ask. Anything you need. I love you, starlight. To the moon and back.”

Athena’s throat became thick and tight, but she smiled. “I know. I love you, too. To the moon and back.”

~oOo~

The next evening, Athena turned off the highway and onto the winding, two-lane road that took her through the little town of Grant to another, narrower, unlined road. She was on her way to the Wesson farm.

She and Sam had not spoken for more than a day. That was rare in the twenty-two years of their friendship, but it wasn’t entirely unheard of. What was unheard of, however, was such a long silence when things weren’t good between them. They didn’t fight often, but when they did, they tended to rush back to each other the second they cooled down.

But they’d never had a break like this before.

Athena was going to Sam, without letting him know to expect her, for a few reasons. The first and most important was that she needed her friend. It was tearing her apart to think that they might really be broken. She had to make sure they found a way to fix things. Also, as she’d lain in bed the night before, fighting as usual to retain one corner of her pillow while

Minnie stretched out over the rest of it, Athena had realized that she'd been lumping Sam in with Hunter, and that wasn't fair. At all.

It freaked her out, badly, to imagine Sam wanting her, to go through all her memories and wonder if things she'd thought were completely platonic and innocent, things she'd felt comfortable doing and being because Sam didn't see her that way, and wonder if—and *when*—he, in fact, *had* seen her that way.

There had to be a path through this mess—and the path was honesty. Communication. They had to work it through; there was no hope if they didn't. But this wasn't something Athena could do in text or on FaceTime. She needed more than words to understand. She needed to be right in front of him, where neither of them could dissemble or otherwise obscure the truth.

Sam was her person, and she would not lose him.

That was the other reason she was making this drive: Athena had always known that Sam was her person, that no one else, not even her parents, was as important in her life as he was. She'd never really considered any implications of that truth; it was simply true, the way her deafness was true. A simple state of her being. But Sam's ... Assertion? Profession? Confession? ... shone a new light on that truth. For the first time, she wondered if it was *strange* to value a platonic relationship above all others.

Or maybe that was the wrong way to think of it. Maybe she was wondering if she, too, had deeper feelings for him than she'd understood.

Truly, she never had thought about him in any kind of sexual way. She knew he was a good-looking guy; she was deaf, not blind. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He was strong and looked it. Her perception of physical strength was perhaps a bit skewed by her father's very muscular body, but even by that metric, Sam had a good body. And his hugs were second only to Dad's.

She liked Sam better when he was shaggy than this new, more styled look Lark had given him, but that was, she thought, mainly because *he* liked *himself* better shaggy. He looked good either way. He had beautiful hazel eyes: bright and curious. And a great smile, one that crinkled the corners of his eyes and drew parentheses around his mouth.

But his looks had never featured at all in her feelings for him. She'd never wanted to kiss him, had never felt turned on by his touch. Every single time she'd ever come near thinking of him in a sexual way had been her and Sam being equally grossed out by their parents trying to push them together. Incest, they always said. It would be like incest.

Sam had felt the same way. Either he'd been lying, and doing a terrifyingly great job at it, or this thing where he thought he was *in love* with her was new.

Was it new? Was it real? What had changed? Was *she* having feelings she hadn't realized were happening? And could feelings she hadn't realized she had be real?

WHAT THE FUCK WAS HAPPENING?

The only way to know was to ask. Work it through. Figure it out. FIX IT. Thus, she was driving up the gravel lane to Sam's family home.

The reason it had to happen right now, before she'd figured out what was going on in her own head: a run to Nevada was happening tomorrow, and Dad had told her that both prospects were on the run. She couldn't let Sam go on a fucking gun run with this mess between them.

He was outside, washing his truck and his bike, as she pulled up. Tank, who'd obviously been getting frequently sprayed with the hose, started his barking butt-wiggle dance as soon as she crested the rise.

Sam wore an ancient pair of jeans, ripped up and washed nearly to whiteness. His t-shirt was draped over a viburnum bush at the corner of the drive. Holding a big, dripping sponge, he watched her drive up and park, but he didn't smile.

He set the sponge on the hood of his truck and went to the bush to get his shirt. When Athena climbed out of her Fiat and closed the door, he walked over, pulling the tee over his chest.

She crouched and gave Tank the requisite greeting snuggle. She'd left Blanche at home this evening; Blanche wasn't yet sure what to make of Tank's enthusiasm.

"Hey," Sam signed as Athena stood. He still wasn't smiling. He looked like he was waiting for trouble.

Athena had run from him at the station, after he'd told her he was in love with her. She'd run because she was freaked out and needed to get away and try to arrange her thoughts into some kind of sense. She hadn't meant to hurt him, but obviously she had.

Of course she had. She'd gone to the station because his lack of communication had hurt her, and then she'd run from him when he'd made himself vulnerable.

Right this second was the first time she'd understood that part: he'd told her a truth that scared him, and she'd run away. She was so spun by her Hunter problem she'd hadn't thought of *Sam's* feelings, what *Sam* had risked to tell her the truth.

"Hi. Can we talk?"

He nodded. "You want to go inside? Mom's making dinner. She'll want you to stay."

Athena's attention snagged on his bike, gleaming in the late-afternoon sun. She hadn't ridden with him since before he'd signed on as a prospect. Maybe it was a bad idea to do it now, with the strange uncertainty suddenly between them, but the impulse was strong nonetheless.

She nodded at the bike. A 1993 Wide Glide that his father had handed down to him. "Can we take a ride?" she asked.

Sam frowned at her. He looked over his shoulder at the bike, then back at her, still frowning. "You sure?"

She nodded.

A deep, slow breath spread his shoulders wide; when he let it out, they deflated quickly. "Okay. Let me run in and tell

Mom we're heading out."

He trotted toward the house. Tank trotted after him, and Athena leaned against her car and looked at the gentle world around her. She loved the farm at evening best of all. The golden light, the sleepy, well-fed animals, the shimmer of breeze through the trees. This was the physical embodiment of *calm*.

When Sam came out, he was pulling his well-worn leather jacket on over his t-shirt. She walked over and met him at the bike.

"Anywhere in particular you want to go?" he asked.

"Our place," she answered. Usually they went there in the dark, for stargazing and sharing random thinky-thoughts, but it was her favorite place to be with him, and it seemed a good, safe place for this scary talk.

He looked at her seriously, his eyes moving back and forth, searching her face. Then he nodded and mounted his bike.

Athena set her hands on his shoulders and used the pedal to boost herself up so she could mount up behind him.

~oOo~

Athena had been riding tandem with Sam since he'd gotten his license shortly before his fifteenth birthday. In the seven years since, she'd ridden with him probably hundreds of times. This time, however, everything hit different. Her arms were around his chest, as always, but now she *felt* him. His body, the way it moved as he steered the bike. She noticed the width of his shoulders and how he shielded her completely. She smelled his shampoo—a perfectly familiar scent; he used Biolage because he liked that scent—but now the fact that it was a Sam scent seemed important in some new way.

It was as if knowing that his feelings for her were different from what she'd thought had changed her experience of him. Not only making her question his actions, but making *him*

something new, so that even the most familiar things about him seemed novel. Like she had to learn him all over again.

While Athena focused inward, on the foaming froth of her thoughts, Sam rode on almost as if he rode alone. But he took the path they both new as well as they knew their own names: they were headed to a wooded glen near a small pond, not far from another tiny farm town called Harris. That pond had belonged to her father's family once, and it was still special to her father, and to her, and thus to Sam—though for most of Athena's life, they'd technically been trespassing when they were there.

Sam rode with care over the rutted, overgrown, long unused gravel lane that brought them to the glen. He parked and waited for her to climb off before he dismounted as well. When he opened a saddlebag, he gave her a questioning look. She nodded, and he pulled out an old flannel sheet he kept in the event of spontaneous stargazing or picnics.

They walked to the place Athena had always thought of as a fairy ring, with an odd, nearly perfect circle of white and yellow flowers around a large patch of lush, green grasses. Working together in long habit, they fluffed open the sheet, with its faded red pine trees, and spread it over the grass. Then they sat down together.

Athena had been thinking for hours, so she jumped right in. "I'm sorry I ran yesterday."

Sam shook his head. "I get it. I freaked you out. *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Yes, you should have. You shouldn't hide something like this from me. That's fucked up—that's what had me so upset in the first place, not knowing what was wrong. But now I'm ... I don't know. I'm rethinking everything, and *that's* freaking me out."

His brow gathered over his eyes with real worry and confusion. "What do you mean, rethinking everything?"

Athena took a beat to form her thoughts into some kind of coherent order. "I'm wondering how long I thought we were

just buddies and you were thinking you wanted more. How many times a hug meant something different to you, or any touch. It freaks me out to think of you ... wanting me like that when I thought I was safe.”

He flinched and went pale, and she regretted her phrasing instantly.

“You are *always* safe with me, Athena.”

“I’m sorry. I know that. I think ... what happened with Hunter is all mixed up with this, and I know that’s not fair. Maybe because he’s the only guy I’ve been with, and now ... fuck, Sam. I’m scared. I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. I can’t lose you, either. I hate this is happening.”

“When? When did it happen? How long?”

“I swear to you, this is all really new. The party was the first time. When Lark and I broke up, she said some shit that made me think—*rethink* everything. But not before that. I swear.”

“That party was fucked up. Two fucked-up birthday parties in a row. Maybe we should do something else next year.”

Sam laughed without smiling. It looked like a spasm more than anything else. “Yeah.”

“What did she say? Lark, I mean. What did she say that changed everything?”

He looked across the glen, toward the pond just beyond the trees. When he began to explain, his attention was on his hands rather than Athena. “At first it was the usual stuff, the same reason as always—jealousy of you, insisting that you had me in the way she wanted me. But then she ... she made a case. It wasn’t just complaining. It felt like ... I don’t know. Like evidence. Like proof—and it made me really think about it like I never had before.”

Getting the sense that Sam was headed toward a tangent when she needed him on the point, Athena reached out and

tugged on his arm. When she had his attention, she asked, “What did she say? What proof?”

“I’ve been thinking about it so much since then I have it memorized. We were having the usual fight, and I was telling her what I’d told her and every other girl I’ve been with a hundred times. Then she asked if I think you’re pretty. I told her I have eyes so I know you’re beautiful. And that was the thing that pushed her over the edge. She made like a bulleted list. First, she said you’re my first priority in life. I always think of you before anything else. Then, that I know everything about you and do whatever I can to make you happy. She said whenever there’s some kind of trouble between her and you, I land on your side. I say I love you when I can’t say that word about any other woman. And she also thought it was meaningful that when she asked if I thought you were pretty, I said you were beautiful.” His head drooped. “All those things are true. I’ve always thought of them as signs of how close our friendship is, but Athena, what if it’s more? I *do* think of you before anybody else. Even my parents and brother come after you. That’s been true our whole lives. I *do* want you safe and happy. It *is* my first concern. I can’t stand anybody saying anything against you, and I cast girls aside with hardly a thought if they try to make me put them at the top. I’ve thought you were beautiful as long as I’ve cared about stuff like that, but I *swear* I never put any of that together and came up with the idea that I loved you as more than a friend. But now it’s in my head, and I think it’s true.”

When he finally raised his head and met her gaze again, he looked desperately sad and afraid. “I’m so sorry. I don’t want things to change between us. I can’t imagine Sam without Frodo. Losing a girlfriend hasn’t ever been anything more than frustrating to me, but the thought of losing you is ripping my insides to pieces. I will get my shit together and be okay again. I’ll get over this. I promise.”

Athena had paid careful attention to every word he’d shaped, every meaning he’d formed. She’d studied his expressions, the wet gleam in his eyes, the tension at his jaw, the slump of his shoulders. The shake in his hands.

He was in love with her. And he was hurting almost more than he could bear.

Something else was happening. As Sam had explained Lark's evidence that he was in love with Athena, he'd described things that were also true for her: Sam was her person, more important than anyone else, even her parents. His happiness was thus more important to her than anything else. She'd never tolerate someone's demand to set him aside. And yes, she knew how handsome he was. She'd always thought duh, of course she did, her eyes worked perfectly well. But was it more for her, too?

She knew her friendship with Sam was unusual in its closeness, and she knew, obviously, that people assumed two cishet people of different genders who were such close friends were, at minimum, harboring unacknowledged feelings of a different kind. That had always irritated the fuck out of her—out of them both, in fact. Like, *why* did people assume men and women could not be platonic friends?

How incredibly annoying it would be if they'd all been right!

“Please say something,” Sam signed. “What are you thinking?”

“I'm trying to figure that out.”

“Is any part of that trying to figure out if you still want to be my friend?”

“Sort of?” she signed—but she hadn't thought that through enough, and it was apparent immediately. What she'd meant was that she was trying to figure out if she felt the same way and wanted something more than friendship, but what Sam obviously read was that she was considering breaking up completely.

“Okay,” he signed sadly, and she grabbed his hand and pulled it to her heart.

“No. That's not what I meant. You and I are never going to lose each other. Never ever.”

Relief rolled through his body, and he managed a smile. “Good.”

“What I meant ...” Could she say this? What would it mean if she did? What would happen?

It didn’t matter. Honesty: a pillar of her family ethos—and she was a terrible liar, anyway. She couldn’t even manage to keep a damn secret. “What I meant is ... what if she’s right?”

He went very still. “What do you mean?”

Now it was her turn for shaking hands. “I don’t know. Since yesterday, I’ve been thinking, rethinking, trying to make sense. Now you tell me you’ve been doing the same thing for not all that much longer, and it’s like what Lark said is a virus or something, because all those things are true for me, too, and now I’m also wondering what if. But Sam, I don’t know. I love you so much, but I’ve never thought of you in that way. Not so I realized it, at least.”

“Me either. Not until now.”

She narrowed her focus and really looked at him. “You never were thinking about sex around me before what Lark said?”

That made him laugh a little. “Well, there were a few years when I was a teenager I was almost never not thinking about sex around anyone and anything. But no, I never thought of *you* like that.”

“But you are now?”

He made a big sigh and looked away for a second before he answered. “I don’t know. That sounds stupid, but it’s true. I felt jealous for the first time up at the cabin. After Lark left but before Hunter ... hurt you. Watching you with him hurt, and that was a first. But I guess I’ve been so upset and confused, worrying that it might be true, and then realizing that it *is* true, I haven’t really thought about ... specifics, I guess.”

Sam wasn’t very smart about girls, obviously, so he couldn’t know how much ease his words offered Athena now. The most upsetting thing about this new development had been wondering how much of their friendship she’d

misunderstood, how much time she'd spent not realizing that he was thinking about sex with her. She'd been combing through years of memories, years of touch, and feeling all her safety, all the love and comfort he'd given her, swirling down the drain. All of it lies.

But it wasn't. Her memories were safe. He was and had always been exactly the friend she'd known him to be. She had been exactly as safe and loved and comfortable as he had always made her feel. It was all real.

If things had changed, they hadn't realized it. Together, they'd missed it.

Even now, he hadn't thought of sex with her.

So the one question that remained was if this new thing was real.

"I think we should try it," she told him, ignoring the massive flock of butterflies that broke free in her belly.

"Try what?"

One thing about being tiny and deaf in a large, loud world: you couldn't be a coward and have anything resembling a normal life. Athena was no coward. She rose to her knees, scooted over until she knelt directly before him. With her right hand flat, her fingers together, she touched her fingertips to her mouth and then to her cheek: "Kiss me."

Sam stared at her, his lovely hazel eyes wide and active. "Athena?"

Athena used fingerspelling for her name only when she was meeting someone new or communicating with someone official. While Athena was her name, in her mind, A-T-H-E-N-A was not. Like most of the Deaf people she knew, she had a sign name, a unique sign that referred directly to her.

Her parents had given her the sign when she was two, after a severe bilateral ear infection had changed the 'moderate' deafness she'd been born with to 'severe,' and they'd known she would never be able to really hear. The sign they'd made for her was their version of the astrological symbol for Pallas

Athena. The symbol was essentially a squared-off version of the symbol for Venus and for ‘female.’

To make her sign name, both hands formed an L; the tips of the thumbs touched, and the forefingers crossed at the top knuckle.

Perhaps, if her hearing parents had had more than a beginner’s understanding of ASL back then, they would not have given her a sign name that took both hands. But Athena had never changed it. It was how she knew herself. Her true name.

Sam had a sign name, too; Athena had given it to him long ago, when they were still children: the closed right fist of the letter S, held up and then tapped twice against the left shoulder. When they called each other Samwise and Frodo, they used the signs for the Tolkien characters.

They used their sign names all the time, of course, whenever they used their names. But when Sam used hers now, looking at her the way he was, with so much *change* crackling all around them, Athena felt that sign like a promise. He knew her, every corner and seam of who she was. He would never hurt her, never leave her. He loved her.

And she felt the same for him.

“Kiss me, Sam” she signed again. “I want to know if it’s real.”

He studied her for one more second, two more seconds. Then he reached out with both hands, framed her face with them, and leaned forward.

Just at the point where their lips would have touched, the strangeness of this moment overwhelmed them both, and, in unison, they turned their heads and laughed.

Athena caught his chin in her hand and drew him back to her. “Sorry,” she signed.

He grinned. “Me too. It’s weird, right?”

“Very. I still want to do it, though.”

“Me too.” With that, Sam returned his hands to her face and came in again.

His lips brushed hers only lightly at first, and then he stopped. He didn’t pull away; his mouth hovered a hairsbreadth from hers, just enough to let her decide if she wanted to back away or come forward for more.

Athena leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Then they held like that, not moving, both studying every part of the sensation, the emotion.

She liked the feel of his beard on her cheeks, her mouth. His lips were warm and firm, dry in the right way. His hands were huge—how had she not realized that they were practically as big as her whole head?

Needing to know more, Athena slipped her hands up to hold his head like he held hers. Her hands were not as big as his head; she could barely cover his cheeks. But his beard felt good there, too.

He must have made a sound of some kind; she could feel the vibration under her palms, the exhalation across her mouth, her cheek, her nose. Somehow, a sound Athena could not hear gave her a good, deep flutter—and she knew what that feeling was: Desire. For *Sam*.

She opened her mouth and tasted his lips.

All at once, Sam deepened the kiss tremendously. He pulled her closer, opened his mouth and covered hers completely, pushed his tongue past her lips—and then, just as suddenly, he backed off.

Dazed by an onslaught of surprising thoughts and sensations, Athena opened her eyes and saw him staring at her, eyes wide, mouth open. By the stuttering heaves of his chest, the tempo of his breath on her face, she knew he was panting.

“I don’t want to do anything you don’t want,” he signed.

They’d been right.

All those girls who’d felt threatened by her, they’d known. And why, exactly, had Athena been so determined to see Sam

as only a friend that she'd willingly allowed—hell, she'd *encouraged*—this amazing, wonderful, perfect human to find love with anyone but her? Sam was her person! How had she known that but not this?

I don't want to do anything you don't want, he'd told her.

“Then don't stop,” she answered.

“Are you sure? After what Hunter—”

She grabbed his hand. “No. Don't bring him here. I'm sure I want more of *us*.”

“Athena ... *God*.”

Rather than hold her face again, Sam clasped her waist and lifted her. He pulled her onto his lap, settling her so she could wrap her legs around him. Hundreds, thousands of times, she'd had her legs around him, because he was about to throw her in the pool and she was trying to make it difficult, or because she was tired at Six Flags and he carried her piggyback, or countless other reasons he'd picked her up and she'd settled in. Never had it been sexual before.

But now all she could feel was his heat and strength. The firm span of his belly between her legs, the powerful clench of his arms around her, the feel of his hands in her hair, the hard heft that grew under her ass. And his mouth! He tasted her, explored her, revered her—every move gentle, attentive, even as it was emphatic. It was nothing like she'd ever felt before.

This was pure sex, but it was much more than that. It was love, and it was friendship. It was *everything*, and Athena felt woozy with it. She twined her arms around him as tightly as she could, kissed him back with the same wild boil of feelings, of *truths*.

She was in love with her Sam.

He finally broke away, dropping his forehead to her shoulder as he panted in her arms. Athena looked up at the sky—it was twilight, suddenly, and the first stars twinkled above their heads. Well, this early, they were planets she could see: Mars, and Jupiter, and Saturn, pushing faintly through the final dregs of daylight leaching from the heavens. This was exactly

the place where her life should change. Right here, in the glen that was her father's favorite place, and hers, where she shared the sky with him and with Sam.

She tapped Sam's shoulder lightly, and he lifted his head and met her eyes, looking just as stunned as she felt.

Athena smiled. "I think they were right."

His eyes shone in the blue of the coming night. He nodded.

Everything that had ever been between them was as it had always been: Complete trust. Deep love. Comfort and safety. Perfect understanding. As always.

But it was wholly different now as well.

Sam was her person. The only one in the world for her.

As she was for him.

Athena tucked her head under his chin and held on.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Before six the next morning, Sam was at the clubhouse. Monty swung his Street Bob onto the lot before Sam had the side door unlocked, so he waited and they went in together.

They were heading out on a Nevada run this morning. This would be only the second time Sam had worked a Russian run, and, like the first time, he was nervous. Fucking up on one of these runs could mean people died.

Last night, the run crew had ridden to the eastern border of the state to collect the shipment and transfer it into the Bulls' van; that had been a short run, and Sam hadn't been called in for it. But for this leg, all the way to Laughlin, Fitz, their road captain, preferred two drivers. Usually, at least one patch took part of the driving duties, so one prospect stayed home to cover the grunt work here, but this time, Fitz wanted both prospects.

The decisions for who rode a run and why were far above Sam's pay grade; he just went where he was told to go and did what he was told to do. But he had noticed that this crew was pretty big: Dex, Caleb, Gunner, Fitz, and Jay, plus the prospects. Usually that meant they were hauling either an unusual amount or an unusual kind of cargo—something that required either more strong backs or more guns. Another thing to be nervous about.

But what they were hauling wasn't his business, either. His and Monty's business first thing this morning was collecting the loaded van from its secure location in a neighbor's garage, making sure it was gassed up and ready for the drive, and that any gear the crew needed beyond their personal shit was checked and packed up. And, first and foremost, getting the coffee started.

Soon Carly, the head sweetbutt, and another girl or two would show up and lay out an easy breakfast, usually pastries or breakfast sandwiches, something like that. But coffee had to be ready when the first patch showed up. Sam made better coffee than Monty, so that was his first job.

They had a big, slightly old fashioned, commercial-grade coffeemaker behind the bar. This morning, Sam had to dump the fresh grounds back and start over three times because he kept losing count. His mind was not, to put it mildly, on coffee or the run or anything else happening today. All he could think about was last night. Athena.

Actually, he wasn't really thinking. Just remembering. When he tried to think a clear thought, all he got was crashing noises. The change between them was so sudden and intense he felt like they'd done a slingshot around the moon, like in space stories.

He'd never imagined kissing Athena until he was actually doing it—and holy fuck. The second she'd scooted up to him and told him to kiss her, any lingering doubt or worry he'd had about his feelings had evaporated. But actually kissing her? That had changed his life. Maybe it had changed *him*—at the cellular level.

Kissing other girls had been pleasant, sexy, fun, all that. Kissing Athena was like having his insides overhauled. It had felt *so* good, *so* intense, so absolutely fucking *right* it had hurt—the kind of pain like finally reaching a deep itch. He'd known at once that he'd been in love with her for a long time.

What a fucking moron he'd been not to see it. But maybe not—maybe they'd figured it out at the exact right time, when they were both *ready* to see it. Not quite simultaneously, but almost.

They hadn't done anything more than make out a little in the woods, then they'd lain together as the stars emerged. They hadn't even talked all that much. When they got back to his house, he'd walked her to her car and kissed her goodnight. Totally PG, and totally perfect.

Every one of those kisses played over and over inside his skull, but even now, he wasn't thinking about more than that, and he didn't *want* to try to imagine more. He wanted to experience everything with her when it was real, and when the time was right.

“Hey, I'm headin' over to—what the fuck's with you?”

Sam looked over at Monty, who'd just come up from the basement. "What do you mean?"

"You got the biggest, shit-eatingest grin I've ever seen. If I couldn't see your legs, I'd think you were getting head right now."

Suddenly aware of his face, Sam got it under control. "Just in a good mood."

Monty grinned. "Somebody got the special kind of laid."

"Fuck off, headass." Sam made it sound like regular shit-giving, but he was irritated. Protective of Athena, when Monty surely wasn't thinking he could have been referring to her.

"So touchy," Monty said and flipped him off. "Headin' out for the van. Back in ten."

"You want company?" The van wasn't far, but it was full of Russian guns, so the buddy system was probably prudent.

"Nah, my uncle's home, so I'll swing by and get him." Monty's uncle was a longstanding hangaround and often helped out around the clubhouse. He'd worked in the station shop for a few years, until he got his real estate license. He was the one who'd recommended the neighbor with the good, secure garage as a stash place.

A couple of bikes roared outside. The blend of sound made it hard to discern which bikes were coming, but Sam was pretty sure one was Jay. Just guessing the route he'd have taken from downtown and whom he might have met on the way, Sam figured the other was Fitz.

"Better get that coffee brewing," Monty said and headed toward the side door.

Sam got the coffee brewing.

~oOo~

"Fuck. That fucking sucks." Monty glared at the van.

In the past half-hour, all the riders had shown up, everything was packed and ready, they'd chugged two pots of coffee and stuffed tiny cheese quiches and bacon-wrapped sausages in their maws, and everybody had taken a turn in the john. They were on the lot, ready to mount up, when Dex had barked the bad news.

"You lodging a complaint, prospect?" Dex asked, his stony expression making it clear there was no complaint box for the prospects.

Dex was generally crabby, but since he'd married Kelsey and they'd had Tildy, he was especially short-tempered when he had to leave town. And now Kelsey was pregnant with their second, so he was basically a rabid grizzly, even though she wasn't due until close to Thanksgiving and everything, as far as Sam knew, was going as it should.

Sam was pissed, too, but he kept his feelings to himself. No point in poking a rabid grizzly.

A long run generally pulled two drivers, and the drivers usually got to bring their bikes. The one driving loaded his bike in the back, or they brought a trailer to tow it. Or the drivers shared a bike for the run, taking turns in the cage and on the bike.

Dex had just told them that neither of them would have a bike; they were both in the truck for the whole run, driving or riding shotgun all the way.

Caged the whole time in the cab was, no question, the worst possible way to experience a run.

"No complaint," Monty grouched, eking out some self-preservation just in the nick of time.

"We need you both in the cab for this run," Fitz explained. He was a lot more patient than Dex. Also, he was Sam's sponsor, and he treated the role like a teacher. "Just to be on the safe side. We're not moving the usual shit this time."

"What are we moving?" Sam asked.

"None of your business, kid," Dex said. He didn't quite bark, but he was obviously not in the mood for questions this

morning. The family men all hated saying goodbye—the club line was ‘always say goodbye like it’s your last chance to do it, because someday it might be’—but Dex let it show in a way the others didn’t.

Sam nodded and stopped asking questions.

“You both carrying?” Gunner asked. Sam opened his kutte to show the Sig P226 holstered under his arm. Monty showed his Glock.

Sam was a good shot with handguns and rifles; his father had taught him and Mason to shoot when they were still little. But he’d never fired at anything but cans, bottles, and paper targets and wasn’t in a big hurry to change that up.

“Let’s ride,” Dex called, and everybody mounted up or climbed in. Everybody on this crew could handle a long ride in the saddle, so they’d be two days to Laughlin, doing about eight hundred miles a day. After an overnight with the Nevada Bulls, they’d do two days back.

Monty got behind the wheel, so Sam climbed up to sit shotgun. As Monty started the van and pulled to the gate, Sam took out his personal and texted Athena.

*We’re riding out. Is it weird if I
say I’m thinking about you nonstop this
morning? I’m going to miss you, Frodo.*

Sorry I’m going to miss your bday

It was early, but Athena worked at a school and got to work before eight in the morning, so he wasn’t surprised that she was up to read his text right away.

We’ll celebrate when you get back.

And it’s not weird at all. I’m the same.

*Be safe, Samwise. FT me when you
get to the motel tonight. xoxo*

She often ended a text with hugs and kisses, so he was probably making too much of them this morning, but they hit

different now. Before they'd described the feelings of his best friend. Now they described the feelings of his girlfriend.

"There's that shit-eating grin again," Monty said, grinning himself. "My dude, I can almost see hearts and flowers dancing around your head like you're Bugs Bunny or some shit. Who *is* this girl?"

"Mind your business, Monty," Sam said and put his phone away.

~oOo~

"It was fine," Sam told Athena. "But Monty's farts should be registered as weapons of mass destruction."

Monty was stretched out on the other bed in this roadside motel just west of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, flipping through the cable channels. Monty didn't know much ASL, so he had no idea Sam had just dragged him—not that he hadn't said exactly the same thing directly to him. Those farts were enough to make a man wish for death.

Athena laughed. "Sorry you don't get to ride in the fresh air this trip."

"Yeah, it sucks. Oh well. Definitely not the first or worst thing about this prospect gig that sucks."

"Not much longer. Your year is up, basically."

It was; he would hit that mark on this run, in fact. "I'm not gonna get a patch so fast, though. Monty's not patched yet, and he's got a year on me."

Athena made the sign that basically indicated ambivalence or indifference, among other things—one of the signs that was as much normal body language as it was ASL: a waggle of her hand. ASL required a lot of interpretation and filling in the blanks, on the part of both signer and receiver. A literal translation of any signed sentence would look like caveman talk—and it was pretty likely that the sentence in the signer's

head wasn't precisely the same as the one the receiver understood.

He understood her now to mean *yeah, that's what you keep saying, but I'm not so sure*. She didn't think he'd have to wait two years for a patch.

Then she asked, "Are you in for the night already? It's earlier there, right?"

"Just an hour. But I think we're going out. We haven't eaten yet, and there's a dive bar across the street," Sam told her. "The guys say they serve good burgers and pizza."

Sam hoped they'd head over soon. The van stayed under guard all night, but everybody on the run took a shift of a couple hours each. Of course, the prospects got the worst shifts, in the middle of the night. Fitz was on the van right now. Sam wanted to be able to eat and get little bit of sleep before his shift came around.

He and Athena FaceTimed for another ten minutes or so, until thunder struck the door as somebody pounded on it with both fists. "Let's go, fellas!" Gunner shouted. "Get your feedbags on!"

"I have to go," Sam said. "Gun's bellowing."

"Okay. Be safe. I love you."

Words she'd given him thousands of times, but now they were completely new. "I love you. Sleep well."

As he set his phone aside and stood up, he saw Monty watching him, a wry smirk on his face. "What?"

"Shit-eating grin. It's Athena. *That's* the girl got you looking like you're about to nut all day long. God *damn*."

There was no good reason for Sam to feel defensive and protective. Monty had been around the club since he was a kid; he knew Athena as well as he knew Sam. They were friends, and he wouldn't disrespect her. There was no reason to keep the change in their relationship a secret; if anything, everybody would be happy for them.

But Sam did feel protective and defensive, and he did feel like Monty had ferreted out an important secret. Later he'd think about why he felt the way he did. Now, though, he simply said, "Shut it, Mont. Leave it alone."

"I'm just sayin'—I bet you twenty there's a pool been going in the club for years, and somebody just won it."

"Fuck *off*." He was probably right, but it had always creeped Sam and Athena out to be the focus of their family's attention in that way, and it was doubly creepy that they'd been right.

Monty raised his hands. "Hey, not my business."

"No. It's not. Let's go eat."

~oOo~

They arrived in Laughlin right on schedule. Sam was driving the van, so he pulled onto the Nevada Bulls' compound and turned right, toward this charter's massive Quonset hut of a garage, while the riders headed to the left to park their bikes by the clubhouse. He parked before the closed overhead door and looked around, wondering what he should do. They needed to get the van locked up inside this garage, but was he supposed to know how to open the door? Or wait for somebody to open it?

"Should I honk or something?" he asked Monty.

Monty chuckled. "I wouldn't. They think you're summoning them, and you'll end up having a seriously fucked night."

"Good point." Sam looked around again, and relaxed. Jordan, the Nevada prospect, was trotting over from the clubhouse.

"Hold up!" he called as Sam put the window down. "I got you!"

"Thanks, man!"

Jordan went through a side door. A few seconds later, the overhead began to roll up. Sam pulled the van in, and the door started rolling down as he cut the engine and he and Monty climbed down.

“You don’t have the door on a remote?” Sam asked as he and Monty met Jordan near the side door, where there was a keypad on the wall.

“They say it’s more secure if somebody has to physically press the code in. I guess if it’s remote, the code can be hacked? I don’t know. The only tech I care about is my PS5.”

Monty raised his arms over his head and stretched. “We off the clock yet?”

“I hope so,” Sam said. “I need a piss, and I’m fuckin’ starvin’.”

“We’ll be doing guard shifts all night,” Jordan reminded them.

Monty hooked an arm over Sam’s neck. “Which is why we need to get to partying right now, before it’s too late!”

~oOo~

“You been staring at your phone all night,” Jordan said as he passed the blunt to Sam. “You workin’ some kind a deal you gotta babysit?”

Sam had first watch, starting at eleven, and he already had a good buzz on, so he passed the blunt on to Monty—and gave him a quelling look when Monty gave him that smirk again.

When Monty made a subtle, ‘we’re cool’ gesture, Sam set his phone face-down on his lap and turned back to Jordan. “No, I’m not working a deal. What? I’m just having a conversation.”

Yes, he was texting with Athena. Yes, he’d rather be doing that than sitting here behind the Nevada clubhouse talking bikes and politics with a bunch of crabby old farts. Zach and

Jay had gone off so Zach could show his brother the plans for the house he and Lyra were preparing to build, and everybody else was either old or crabby or both—or a prospect. Sam would have preferred texting with Athena *before* the brand-new change in their relationship, but now, she was all his brain wanted to think about.

“Sorry we’re boring you,” Jordan said and looked at his watch.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that, too.”

“The way you keep checking your watch,” Monty pointed out as he handed the blunt back to Jordan, “looks like we’re not the only ones bored.”

“We’re just not baked enough is the problem,” Jordan said and took a big hit—he blew it out so fast, though, he wasted most of it. “Sam, man, c’mon.” He held the blunt out to Sam.

Sam took it and handed it directly to Monty. “I’m on watch in a couple hours. I do not need to be baked straight through while I’m guarding the van. Thanks though.”

“Mr. Responsibility over here,” Jordan complained. “You saw the security. It’s stupid we gotta guard the fucker, too. More bullshit prospect busy work. Monty, help me out. What do you do to get this asshole to lighten up?”

Monty shrugged. “Looks to me like Sam’s doing what he wants to be doin’. Anyway, I ain’t his keeper.” He took a hit and passed the blunt back to Jordan.

Jordan dropped back into his chair like he was pouting.

Sam stood up. “Yeah, this is a laugh riot and all, but I’m gonna go inside and find something to eat.” He walked away and left Jordan to his mood.

~oOo~

Jordan had been acting like a basic bitch, but he wasn’t exactly wrong. Sam was bored out of his head standing watch from

eleven to two. The way the compound was laid out, it didn't seem like there was a lot of danger to worry about. The land was flat desert in every direction, with sightlines like five miles long. And it was eerily fucking quiet once everybody was asleep. No birds or anything. Total fucking silence. There was no way to sneak up on the place, and certainly no way to get into this bunker of a garage without being heard.

But, again, he was a prospect, so he did what he was told. He walked the compound perimeter a couple of times, then parked his ass on the bench in front of the charter's racing shop and messed around on his phone, looking up every ten minutes to see the same vast view of literally nothing.

Finally, he heard scuffling over the gravel, and he looked up to see Jordan hurrying toward him. "Hey man, I'm up," he said. "Any trouble?"

Sam stood. "Nope. Just dark and quiet. You get any sleep?"

"Yeah, sure," Jordan said, clearly not interested in having a discussion. "See ya."

"Yeah, see ya."

Sam headed off toward the bunkhouses. He and Jordan didn't know each other much; this was only the second time they'd been in the same place. But based on the little bit of evidence he'd gathered, he didn't see them becoming great friends.

When he got to the bunkhouse he, Monty, and Jay were supposed to be sharing, Jay was nowhere to be seen, but Monty was passed out face-down on the fold-out sofa bed. He'd filled the place to the ceiling with his noxious farts. There was something wrong with that guy's plumbing.

For about twenty minutes, Sam tried to bury his face in the covers and sleep through that poison, but he wasn't tired enough to go under in such conditions. He gave up, put his boots back on, and left. He'd find a place to crash in the clubhouse somewhere.

~oOo~

The clubhouse smelled of booze, sweat, sex, and ... farts, but the mélange was more bearable than the killing room he'd left. A few lights were still on, enough so he could see around the room. Jay was passed out in a recliner, a bottle of beer lying on his lap and a large wet spot covering most of his leg. Sam grinned at that; dude was going to look like he'd pissed himself. Most of the Nevada Bulls were unconscious in various positions and locations around the party room. Old Ben was stretched out alone on a sofa like he'd fallen asleep watching TV at home. Gunner was passed out on the floor. They could expect a refrain on repeat tomorrow about how he was 'too old for this shit.'

There wasn't much in the way of comfortable sleeping options available in here, either. Shit, maybe he'd get his bedroll off the back of his bike and sleep under the stars.

In fact, yeah. That sounded like a great idea. There wasn't much moon, and no clouds. The stars were dancing tonight.

As Sam headed to the front door, a bright flash of light through the front window caught his eye. He looked again and saw headlights. Three sets. At quite a distance, maybe a mile away.

And then the headlights went dark: the first car, then the second, then the third.

Every hair on Sam's body stood straight up.

He didn't understand everything about the club yet, and he'd never been in any kind of dangerous situation in this time wearing a kutte. All the terrible stuff that had happened during the Perro years, he'd been one of the kids in lockdown, worried about his family. He'd never seen the trouble, only the consequences.

Even so, he knew three cars—maybe trucks; they were too far away to be sure of that, but definitely pairs of headlights, so not bikes—coming down a desolate desert road that led to nowhere but this clubhouse at past two in the morning was

definitely trouble. It would be suspicious even if they hadn't cut their lights, but they had, with the pacing of a plan being executed.

He couldn't see them anymore in the dark, but something in him was afraid to look away, afraid to turn his back.

Then he caught a ghost of movement at the side of the window and leaned that way, straining to see through the dark. He saw a slightly lighter shape moving—the white door of the garage was rolling up. The windows in the clubhouse were all closed and the AC on, but when he focused, he could hear the door's motor.

Only way to roll that door up was the code, keyed directly into the keypad inside the garage.

Jordan was putting up the door. While three cars sneaked up on the compound.

Sam leapt to the door, meaning to hit the big bank of switches beside it and turn on all the lights, including the overheads—but he pulled up at the last second. Sudden light would warn whoever was coming.

He had to get all these passed-out-drunk Bulls on their feet and alert right the fuck now! “WAKE UP!” he yelled. “TROUBLE! WAKE UP!”

A few vague sounds of stirring, but not enough. Gunner was closest, so Sam ran to him, crouched and grabbed him by his kutte to shake him. “UNCLE GUN!! WAKE UP!! WE GOT TROUBLE!”

“The fuck?” Gunner asked, blinking and trying to knock Sam's hands away. “What's goin' on?”

Old Ben was on his feet and crossing the room. “You said trouble?”

Geno pushed a girl off his lap and struggled to his feet. “What trouble?”

“Three cars, headlights went dark while I watched. They were like a mile away, so they'll be here any second.” He

didn't hear engine noise yet, but maybe the clubhouse was insulated so well it couldn't pass through.

Sam's report got Gunner and Geno moving. Gunner pushed Sam aside and ran to the front window as Sam and Geno worked on getting everybody else moving.

"Fuck!" Gunner called. "They're coming through now—three goddamn *Teslas*! Who left the gate open?"

Sam realized just then that the gate, which he knew for a fact had been closed and locked when he was on watch, was now standing open. He'd seen it while he watched the cars, but it hadn't registered.

"It's Jordan," he said, without a single qualm about making the accusation. "Gate was locked when he took over for me, and he just put the garage door up."

"The fuck he did!" Geno yelled. The party room was now becoming a chaotic scrum of Bulls trying to pull their shit together as fast as they could.

"We gotta get out there," Gun said. "They're goin' for the motherfuckin' garage!"

"Where's Dex?" Sam called. Dex was the lead on this run.

"Where's Coop?" Jay echoed.

"I'm here!" Cooper called, running down from the loft. His arms were full of guns. "There's seven of 'em, whoever they are."

"Dex is in the bunkhouse. Fitz and Caleb, too," Zach said, grabbing an AK and handing it to Sam. "Sam, run out there and get 'em. Maybe we can flank these bastards."

Sam nodded and ran to the back. The others were loading up and heading to the front.

About ten steps from the clubhouse, the shooting started up front. His heart beating so wildly he thought it might burst straight through his ribs, Sam tripled his speed.

When he flew through the door of the nearest bunkhouse, he almost got a face full of lead. Dex was on his feet and

aimed right at him.

He pulled up as soon as he saw it was Sam. “What the fuck is goin’ on?”

Sam struggled to keep his voice calm enough to be clear. “Ambush. Coop says seven guys. They’re after the cargo.” Another barrage of gunfire split the night.

“Fuck!” Fitz yelled. They were both fully dressed, even their boots on.

“Do you know how to shoot that thing?” Dex asked Sam, nodding at the AK.

Sam shook his head, and Dex snatched it away. “Use your sidearm, then. Stay back, stay low. Be ready to cover whoever needs cover. But don’t you run out ahead.”

Unable to form another word, Sam nodded. When Dex hurried through the bunkhouse door, Fitz followed, and Sam took the rear.

Caleb and Monty were already outside, ready to run forward, but Dex held them up. “We go together, around the other side of the garage. Try to flank them. We can’t lose that cargo. Run!”

They ran. Sam’s chest was on fire, but he wasn’t afraid, exactly. He was trying so hard to see everything, to do what he was told and not fuck up, there wasn’t room in his head for fear.

As they ran through the dark, passing the wide space between the clubhouse and the garage, Sam looked toward the front. He saw the cars—black sedans, he thought, apparently Teslas, if Gun was right, which would account for the lack of engine noise—and he saw men crouching and running amid bright bursts of gunfire, but he couldn’t tell who was who.

“Fuck!” Dex whisper-roared. “Faster!” He kicked in a new gear, and everybody kept pace with him.

They came around the far side of the garage, onto a chaotic scene. Bodies were on the ground, but who? It was too dark to know.

“Sam! Monty! Cover the van!” Dex shouted. Sam veered to the right and ran into the garage. Monty was right behind him. Without having to say it, they split, doing the perimeter of the van in opposite directions.

When Sam turned at the rear bumper, he came face to face with Jordan, and they both pulled up short.

Sam had his Sig in his hand, ready to fire but not aimed. Jordan had a shotgun held across his body.

Sam wanted to ask him what he'd done, and why he'd done it, but he caught the motion when Jordan began to swing that Mossberg forward. Without thinking, Sam aimed and fired. The bullet struck Jordan dead-center in his chest.

Jordan fired as he fell, and buckshot sprayed in an upward arc. Sam ducked and jumped out of the way, but he felt the punches of a few pellets. *Holy shit*, that hurt.

The pain was enough to make him dizzy and queasy, and blood began to flow down his arm and chest, but he was still on his feet, so he ran forward.

Monty was on the floor, unconscious and bleeding from somewhere around his head. Sam crouched quickly and found a pulse, so he moved on. He wasn't making actual decisions, was barely processing anything happening. He was acting purely on instinct, and that instinct drove him toward the fight.

Suddenly, the van's engine roared to life. Sam whipped around and saw someone behind the wheel, no more than a person-shaped black blob. He aimed at that blob as the van jumped backward out of the garage, but his shot went wide. When he tried to aim again, his vision went wonky and he lost the chance before the van whipped around.

He ran out of the garage to chase it, ready to shoot again. Gunner and Ben were crouched against the side of one of the Teslas, weapons ready; they both jumped up to fire at the van.

And then, all at once, the world spun sharply, and Sam fell to the ground.

He didn't pass out. He lay there staring up at the night sky, wondering what the fuck had happened.

Nevada had amazing night skies. He could see actual galaxies above him. Athena would lose her shit if she saw how many stars crowded into this span. He'd never get her away from her telescope. Oh, look. Andromeda, clear as fuck with his own two eyes. Andromeda was her favorite.

“Sam! Jesus fuck!” Gunner dropped to his knees at Sam’s side and grabbed his hand. “Here!” He put Sam’s hand against Sam’s own neck—ow. Fuck, that hurt. “Press hard as you can!”

“Hurts,” Sam protested—and then Gunner arched sharply backward and fell forward, landing on Sam’s chest so hard pain exploded through his whole top half and the world went grey and sparkly at the edges.

“Uncle Gun?” It was surprisingly hard and painful to talk.

Gunner groaned. “I’m okay, I’m okay.” His hand moved clumsily up to Sam’s hand at his neck. “You gotta hold tight, kid. Hold tight. You bleed out, and your mother will fuckin’ kill me.”

Why did Gunner sound so tired? “I don’t know what’s goin on,” Sam said. Using his voice made the world flash red.

“You got a booboo, kiddo. Don’t think I can kiss it and make it better. I guess I took one, too. Doesn’t hurt, but I can’t ... really ... feel any—” he cut off, was quiet for a second, then snapped back with a gasp. “Hey! Hey! We gotta stay alert. Yeah?”

“Tired.”

“Me too. It’s quiet now, though. That’s either good or bad. Guess we’ll find out.”

Uncle Gun was right. It was quiet. Sam tried to remember why that was important. Then he heard a male voice he couldn’t place shout, “Pop! Pop? POP! Oh GOD!”

“Shit,” Gunner groaned. “Who’d we lose?”

Sam had no idea what that meant.

“Jesus! Gun! Sam! OVER HERE!”

A giant shadow loomed over Sam. He tried to figure out who it was, but his eyes wouldn't focus anymore.

So he closed them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Athena woke with the foggy sense that the world was being torn apart; she opened her eyes into a nearly dark room. A huge shadow loomed over her, and her next sleep-infused thought was that she was being attacked. She lashed out and punched her assailant in the face.

He reeled back and into the wedge of light coming from the hallway. It was her father.

She sat up and switched on her bedside lamp. “Dad?”

“You pack a wallop, starlight,” he signed. “Damn.”

“Sorry. What’s wrong?”

“I need you up right now and a bag packed with a couple days’ essentials. Anything for Blanche, too.” Minnie had stretched and strolled down the side of the bed to demand pets from Dad. He picked her up and obliged. “I’ll bring Minnie down so she can go in the carrier with her sister. Mom’s got the ladies’ stuff. Twenty minutes tops, okay?”

She knew what all this meant. “Lockdown?”

“Yeah. There’s trouble in Nevada.”

Her heart stopped and then exploded into a frenzy. “Sam’s on the run! Is he okay?”

Her father’s look became so serious Athena felt despair rise at once. Still holding Minnie, he sat beside Athena’s hip and signed one-handed. “What I know is he’s alive. But he took a hit from a shotgun, and one of the pellets opened his neck. He lost a lot of blood, and he’s unconscious. When I got the call from Mav, that’s what he knew.”

“But he’s alive.” She was afraid to think what the other stuff might mean, so she clung to that important fact.

“He’s alive. Gun took a hit, too: two in the back. He’s in surgery, but Mav sounded pretty grim about him.” Dad shook his head and stood. “We gotta go, Athena.”

Heart pounding, limbs shaking, stomach roiling, she tossed her covers aside. “Okay. I’ll be ready.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Good girl. And hey—happy birthday, starlight.”

Athena laughed sadly. Right. Today was her actual birthday. This was a terrible year for birthday events. “Thanks, Dad.”

~oOo~

It had been years since the club had locked down. Athena and Sam had been in high school the last time, and that lockdown had happened because the Bulls had gone off to fight a war with the Perro Blanco cartel.

Now, before dawn, the clubhouse was packed with family, close club friends, and pets. The Bulls had all immediately locked themselves in the chapel, and Marcella, experiencing her first lockdown, was directing the old ladies, the club kids, and the sweetbutts, as everybody figured out where to put everyone and how to separate the family cats from the family dogs, got food and drink going, and figured out how to keep the younger kids busy.

Athena was so worried about Sam—about Uncle Gun, too, but mainly about Sam—she felt sick and shaky. Her mom had noticed that she was pale, so she’d given her the task of watching the younger kids. They were still drowsy from the early wake-up, so they were sprawled in front of the TV, watching *Bluey*. Athena sat in the corner of a sofa, knitting and trying not to freak out.

Sam was alive. He’d been shot and had lost a lot of blood, but he was alive and now he was at a hospital, where they could give him blood. He would be okay. It was making her completely nutso that he was so far away and she couldn’t get to him, but he would be okay. He would come home and be okay, and they would be able to figure out what happened next for them.

Nobody in the family, not even her parents, knew that things had changed between her and Sam, so nobody was fussing over her the way they were fussing over Aunt Leah and Aunt Deb.

When things were chaotic like this, a lot of people forgot that Athena couldn't hear. Her parents frequently signed when they spoke even when they weren't speaking to her, but Dad was in the chapel and Mom was so busy her hands were usually full. Athena had been pushed to the side and reduced to trying to glean information from what she could read on people's lips and in their body language. It was like reading a book where every other page was missing.

Things with Uncle Gun were obviously serious and scary. Aunt Leah was pacing, leading a small cluster of women around with her and Larissa, their daughter. Larissa had been crying since they'd arrived. Aidan, their son, sat in a corner with his arms crossed, glaring at the closed door of the chapel. He was a freshman at OU, but the club had called him home. Were Emily and Anne Becker and James Mathews, the other college students in the family, all of whom went to school farther away, on their way home, too? How far did Bulls danger reach?

Athena had seen Leah speak the word *coma* several times, and the word *paralyzed* a few times, and assumed she was speaking of Uncle Gun, but she had no sense of whether these were long-term things, like a vegetative-state kind of coma and permanent paralysis, or if they were just things that were true right now and he'd get better.

Someone had died, too, she thought, but she wasn't sure. God, it was so frustrating! Athena dropped her knitting and slammed her hands to her eyes, needing to push everything in her head into a manageable size. Her head fucking *hurt*, and her stomach was doing a gymnastics routine inside her.

In fact ... she might actually need to be sick. She set her knitting on the sofa's arm and stood; that made her dizzy and even more nauseated, so she ran through the party room, dodging people in every direction, and just barely made it to

the bathroom and the toilet before she yarked whatever was left of last night's dinner into the bowl.

When she was done, she didn't want to go back out into that morass of panic and confusion. She sat on the floor, her back against the wall, and tried to breathe. Blanche had followed her into the bathroom; now she sat at Athena's side, ready to be needed. Athena wrapped her arms around her dog and held on.

This was the only bathroom on the main floor, so she couldn't hog it forever. Eventually Athena pulled herself together, stood and went to the sink to rinse out her mouth and wash her hands. Her reflection stared back at her, looking gaunt and dazed.

Trouble was always when Athena felt her difference most keenly. She'd been forgotten.

When she felt strong enough to brave the chaos again, she opened the door.

Her mother was standing right outside, hands on hips, frown in place. When Athena stepped out of the bathroom, Mom grabbed her face and looked her over carefully. Then she asked, "What's going on?"

"I'm okay. Just so freaked out I got sick."

"Vomiting sick?"

Athena nodded. Then Mom put her hands on her shoulders to hold her in place and studied her some more.

"When are you due, Athena?"

In the time she needed to lift her hands, ready to ask *Due where?*, Athena figured out what her mother meant, and her hands froze.

Her period was regular-ish, heavy on the *ish*. The window of possibility for its start was about four days, but when it arrived, its duration was predictable: four days, the first one light, the second heavy, then tapering off over the next two.

Tracking the start was a pain in the ass, and tracking apps were creepy data mines that no woman should use—with a

tech-security father and a private investigator mother, Athena had gotten ALL the lectures and didn't use apps that collected data about her actual biology. She used the first spots in her underwear as her indicator of her period. Inelegant but effective.

Now Athena cast her mind back, trying to think what she was doing when she'd had her last period.

It was before Sam's birthday. She remembered being crampy while they were talking about it.

She pulled her phone from her jeans and checked her calendar. Even assuming it was running late, she should have had it by now.

That *shithead*. He hadn't used a condom, had he? He'd not only raped her; he'd made her pregnant.

She wasn't surprised, exactly. Her extremely detail-oriented mother had brought up the possibility almost as soon as she'd learned what had happened. She wasn't upset, exactly, either. She had perfect clarity about what she'd do about it, and her life wouldn't change a jot. But oh, she was pissed. That *fuckhead*!

When Athena met her mother's eyes again, she didn't need to make a single sign. Her eyes apparently did the signing for her. Mom took a big breath and let it out. "Go sit for a minute. Stay close. I'll be back." With that, she strode up the hall, leaving Athena and Blanche to follow.

Her head a vortex of rage and worry, Athena returned to the party room, but she didn't sit. She found a space near the hallway and stood there.

Her worry was all for Sam. Her rage was for Hunter. She wanted to turn his stupid skinny dick inside out.

With a moment alone to think, the last moment when this result of it was a question without an answer, Athena discovered that she was a little surprised by her reaction to what Hunter had done. She was a ball of rage and offense, but she wasn't traumatized. At first she'd felt some shame and frustration for being unable to fend him off, but her fury had

throttled shame within the first few days. Before the cabin, her experience with rape had been mostly from media, and from her mother's story of what had happened to her, so she supposed she'd expected that, if it ever happened to her, she'd be traumatized, that her trust in humanity itself would have been shaken to the ground.

But she wasn't. Maybe her general suspicion of humanity itself provided a shield from trauma. She wasn't one of those people who believed everyone was fundamentally decent. She thought most people were fundamentally selfish assholes, so maybe she simply wasn't surprised Hunter was capable of rape.

Her anger was directed straight at Hunter, and with so narrow a focus, it didn't get in her way. It was a thing that had happened, a thing she had to deal with, but it didn't seep into the rest of her life.

The idea that she might be pregnant because Hunter had raped her pissed her all the way the fuck off, but it didn't make her panic. She didn't despair or feel sorry for herself. She felt fury. White hot. Hunter had felt so entitled to her body he'd thought it was okay to jump on her when she was sleeping and fuck her without her consent. And he'd done it without a condom.

Yeah, making him quit his job was not enough. She wanted that asshole to *bleed*.

Mom was back, signing "Come," and grabbing Athena's arm. She pulled her back to the bathroom and handed her a pregnancy test kit. She'd been gone like two minutes, and Athena was pretty sure they didn't stock test kits in the convenience shop.

"Where?" Athena asked.

"Basement. We keep them in the stored med supplies, in case one of the girls needs one. Go on. I'll wait out here."

Athena took the box, went into the bathroom—leaving Blanche with her mother—and got down to the business of taking a pregnancy test.

~oOo~

A few minutes later, she opened the door and waved her mother into the bathroom. The test stick sat on the edge of the sink. Mom glanced down at it, said *fuck*, picked up the stick and stared hard at it, said *fuck* again, and met Athena's eyes.

Athena looked steadily back. Still she wasn't frantic, wasn't traumatized, wasn't even particularly upset. Her upset was entirely for Sam. Practically speaking, being pregnant was a pain in the ass, but not a trauma. In no part of her brain did she think of the clump of cells inside her as anything but another nasty thing Hunter had done that night.

But she was absolutely furious.

"What do you want to do?" Mom signed.

"What do you think I want to do?" Athena replied at once. "I don't know if I ever want to have a baby, but I know for sure I don't want to have that asshole's baby or to be a mom when I'm twenty-two years old."

Today. She was twenty-two today. Fuck this birthday into the ground.

Mom nodded. "We'll make it happen. But not right now."

"Not right now," Athena agreed. There was nothing she could do during a lockdown, and she didn't even want to discuss it much while they were surrounded by their whole family. Most of their family.

She had time to deal with this nasty birthday present after Sam was home and she could see with her own eyes that he was going to be okay.

But GOD, she was pissed. "I want to hurt that fuckhead. I want to make him bleed."

Mom frowned and tilted her head. "Are you venting, or are you making a plan? I've got some things we can do to fuck his life up. I was ready to talk to you about that anyway until we

got the call to lock down. But if you want him to actually bleed, we'll need the club in on it. That's not my area."

Her mother was very happy to make bad people suffer, but she attacked their reputation, their financial security, their relationships. Not their bodies.

Athena was angry enough to want Hunter physically hurt, badly—killed would be dandy, in fact. But if her father knew, it could start a chain reaction that led right back to this clubhouse. So she shook her head. "No. Not that. I don't want Dad to know."

"This is a lot to keep from him, Athena. I don't know if we can keep this a secret without lying to him."

Before Athena could respond, Mom's head whipped toward the door, and Blanche alerted Athena; there was someone on the other side. *Just a minute!* Mom called.

Then she crouched before the vanity cabinet and pulled out one of the plastic grocery bags they used to line the wastebasket. "Let's pack this up like trash. If anybody asks why we're all in here, I'll make something up. Then you and I need to go upstairs and find a place to talk some things out."

Athena took the stick from her mother, and the box and wrapping, and tossed it all in the wastebasket. She wadded some tissues and tossed them in, pulled the bag from the basket, took the bag Mom had gotten out of the cabinet, and put the filled bag inside it. Then she tied it all off. It looked like regular trash.

Despite all the badness of the day, Mom grinned. "You've got a knack for subterfuge, starlight. You should come back to work with me."

"No thanks," Athena replied, finding a grin of her own. "I like the job I have."

It was Marcella outside the door. “Everything okay?” she signed when she saw both Athena and her mom *and* Blanche coming out of the small bathroom.

“Yep,” Mom said and signed. “Just had a little woman’s emergency.”

Athena was impressed. That was both perfectly true and inexact enough to be easily mistaken.

Marcella easily mistook it. She turned a sympathetic look on Athena. “Oh, baby. Do you need something for cramps? I’ve got the good weed.”

“No thanks. Maybe later, though.”

“You got it. Just let me know.”

As Marcella went into the bathroom and Athena and her mom headed to the back to get rid of the bag, Mom grabbed her arm.

“The guys are coming out of the chapel. We’ll talk later. You run that bag to the dumpster and get back here.”

When Athena nodded, Mom headed to the party room.

Feeling sick again, not knowing how much was worry about Sam and whatever the Bulls had decided and how much was her body still being fucked by that toad she’d stupidly, briefly thought maybe she loved, Athena went to dispose of the evidence.

~oOo~

The Bulls were riding to Nevada. Immediately. Only Christian and Duncan were staying behind to protect the family with Uncle Rad, who would be in charge of the clubhouse. They wanted everybody who had enough age and experience to be trusted with a gun to be armed. That included Athena.

She still had no idea what had happened in Nevada to put the people in Oklahoma at risk, but enough club shit had

happened in her lifetime for her to believe there was real danger, and it was somehow really big.

And Aunt Deb and Aunt Leah were going with the club.

There was a fight about that, one that looked like it was probably loud, right after the club had come out of the chapel. Nobody was signing, so Athena had to read lips. She didn't have the entire story, but she got enough to fill in most of the gaps. The Bulls had not wanted the women to leave lockdown. Uncle Simon would be in Nevada for Sam, and the whole club for Uncle Gun. It wasn't safe for the women to come with them.

Aunt Leah and Aunt Deb were simply not having it. Uncle Gun, Leah's husband and Deb's brother, was badly injured and might not make it. Sam was Deb's son. They would not be left behind.

Uncle Simon and Aunt Deb went literally toe to toe, shouting at each other right in the middle of the party room. Deb was crying, and it distorted her mouth so much Athena had trouble making out any of her words, but she figured she could guess. She felt a similar fear, a similar need to get to Sam—but she knew no one would even consider letting her go. They probably weren't considering her at all just now.

Uncle Simon was saying to Aunt Deb over and over, "I can't lose you, I can't lose you." Then Mason jumped in and begged his mom to stay. That finally made Deb think twice.

But in the end, Uncle Simon and Mason relented, the club relented, and Deb and Leah were going to Nevada. They trailered Simon's bike and hooked it to Deb's SUV; Simon would drive them.

As the club readied to leave, and Athena's parents were having their goodbye, Athena finally got to Sam's mom, who seemed so surprised to see her. Athena thought she might have actually forgotten she existed.

"Hi, love," Aunt Deb signed. "You doing okay?"

Though Sam's mom looked like she might keel over from her own frantic worry, Athena answered honestly. "Not really.

I'm worried about him, and nobody's told me anything since my dad first said he'd been shot. Is he okay?"

Aunt Deb's face cramped with worry and more tears, but she mustered up a fraction of a brave smile. "He lost a lot of blood, and he's still unconscious. They're worried he lost too much—they downgraded him to critical condition about an hour ago."

Everybody really had forgotten Athena. Nobody had thought to keep her informed. Would they have if they'd known that Sam was more than her best friend?

"I want to come with you."

Deb was shaking her head before Athena was done signing. "Absolutely not. The club won't hear of it, and your mother would disembowel me if I tried to make a case. You need to stay here, where you're safe. I will bring your love to him." She caught Athena's hand and gave it a squeeze. With her free hand, she signed. "I saw you and him the other night, by your car. I know things are different between you."

She and Sam had had a real goodbye that night. Their relationship had changed, and he was going on a dangerous run—Athena's heart kicked hard at that thought—so they'd had a lover's goodbye.

His mom knew. It was both terrifying and wonderful that somebody knew. It was real.

The tears were upon Athena before she could do anything to stop them. Deb pulled her into a tight hug and held on until she calmed.

"I'm glad, sweetheart," Deb signed when the hug was over. "So glad. I will make sure he comes home to you. Okay?"

Athena could only nod. When she started to cry again, Deb pulled her into her arms again, and they cried together.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sam came to awareness with a groan. Every single part of his body hurt in some way—but his neck and shoulder were the mainstage of his pain festival. He needed more of the good drugs.

He opened his eyes to a soft-focus view of formless white. The first time he'd opened his eyes in this place, he'd thought he'd died, and this was the light people talked about going into. But it had turned out to be the ceiling of a hospital—the ceiling of the intensive care ward at this hospital, which was in Nevada somewhere.

He'd almost died, apparently. Catastrophic hemorrhage, he remembered somebody saying. Couldn't remember who, but probably a doctor.

Something was different. The room was quieter.

He blinked his eyes, trying to clear his vision. When he could finally look around, he saw he was in a different room altogether, one with four solid walls rather than three walls of glass. Fewer machines in here—though he was still connected to several.

And Fitz stood at the foot of his bed, looking ruffled and exhausted. But he was smiling a little.

“Hey, prospect. How you feeling?”

Sam tried to clear his throat. It hurt a lot, but he got it done. “They moved me out of the ICU? That's good, yeah?”

“It's good. They got the infection under control, and after a couple more bags of blood you'll be full up.” Fitz put his hand on a lump of covers that was Sam's foot; Sam noticed heavy traces of blood in his knuckles and around his nail beds. “You're gonna be okay, kiddo. I thought we were gonna lose you when you were bleeding out on the ground, but you're gonna be okay. Some impressive scars, but chicks digs scars.”

As wakefulness took hold, Sam remembered more. “Uncle Gun? Is he okay?” Gun had fallen on him at the compound.

He'd been shot trying to save him. Not trying—*doing* it. His uncle had saved his life.

Fitz's stunted smile disappeared entirely. "He's bad. Still unconscious. They're calling it a coma. And the bullets severed his spine completely. He won't walk again."

"What?" Sam couldn't get his head around that news. "No way. He's a fighter. He'll wake up, and he'll get back on his feet."

"Sam. No, he won't. He's paralyzed from the waist down. We're just trying to get him to wake up now."

"But he can't ride without his legs."

"That's a worry for later, kiddo." Fitz looked over at the bank of machines, then he came to the side of the bed and set his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Don't stress about Gun, okay? He's in good hands. There's nothing you can do, and making yourself sick worrying about him doesn't help anybody."

"He got shot coming for me."

"I know. That doesn't make it your fault. We all got each other's back. Right? You're the reason we knew we were getting hit. If not for your sharp eyes, those fuckers would've got away clean with our shit. They almost did anyway. But we got 'em all, and we got our shit back, and that's because of you."

Another memory freshened. "Jordan. I think it was Jordan."

Fitz nodded. "It was. And you got him, too—but he was still kicking long enough to press him for details. You did good, Sam. Gun's not on you. Every hurt we took, it's on Jordan and it's on the piece of shit who flipped him."

"Do you know who?"

"We got a good idea, but don't poke around there yet. Above your pay grade for now."

One of the worst things about being a prospect: having to do some deeply upsetting and obviously illegal shit and not having any clear understanding of why. But Sam had been in it

long enough by now to know there was no point in trying to get answers, so he asked another important question.

“Who else got hurt? On our side, I mean.”

“From Tulsa, just you and Gun. Monty took a blow to the head, but he’s okay. Just got his bell rung a little. Nevada lost Ben. And Geno took a slug in his shoulder.”

“Ben? Their VP, right? Zach’s father-in-law, sort of? They lost him?” As Sam understood it, Ben was the heart of the Nevada charter, deeply connected to most of the patches. His son, his daughter’s old man, his best friend—all patches. And he was dead? Sam barely knew the man, but he understood what a blow to a family that was.

“Yeah,” Fitz said. “He’s gone. He took one to the head and was dead before anybody could get to him.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Hey, kid. It’s bad, but don’t get lost in it, okay? Your job right now is to get well, prospect. You got people who need you well.”

“Athena,” he said without thinking.

Fitz didn’t seem to think it was unusual for Sam to think of Athena first. “She knows you’re gonna be okay. Your folks, too. We’re keeping everybody at home up to speed, and they’re safe—we called a lockdown to make sure. And Tulsa’s on its way here as we speak. Your folks should be here in an hour or two.”

“My folks? My mom, too?” Sam’s throat and the backs of his eyes started to itch madly. He needed his mom, but he didn’t want her at risk. “Is it safe?”

Fitz chuckled softly. “There was no way to keep Deb or Leah away. It was safer to keep them with the club, because they’d have come out on their own right after the club rode out anyway. We’ll keep ‘em safe.”

The door swung open, and Cooper poked his head in. When he saw Sam awake, he stepped all the way in and

smiled. In his drawn, weary face, the effect was a little macabre. “Hey kid. How’re you feeling?”

“Shitty. But better. How’re you doing?”

“Shitty, yep. But it’s good to see you with some color in your face.” Turning his attention to Fitz, he said, “finally got rid of law out there, and Tulsa’s here. We’re meeting in the chap—”

He cut off when the door hit his back. Sam’s mother burst into the room.

“Mom,” Sam gasped—and started to bawl.

Ignoring everyone else, Mom flew to his side. “Baby! Baby, baby, baby, baby!” She held his head carefully and covered his face in kisses. “I’m here, Sam. I’m here. You’re okay, you’re okay.”

Not caring that his shoulder screamed and his neck throbbed, not caring that he was sobbing like a little kid, Sam grabbed hold of his mother and let his feelings—his fear, his anger, his pain, his worry, his grief, his relief to have his mom and dad, his need for Athena—he let it all free.

When he was done, his body was sore and shaky, his head felt thick, and he was completely exhausted. With a final kiss to his forehead, Mom leaned back and smiled wetly at him. Her face was streaked with her own tears.

Except for his father, who stood at the other side of the bed, they were alone in the room. Cooper and Fitz had left.

“Hi, Dad,” Sam said when he could speak again.

Dad set his hand on Sam’s head. “Hi, son. You look like shit.”

Sam smiled. “Thanks a lot.” He turned to his mom again. “Any word on Uncle Gun?”

Mom shuddered. “I don’t know what you know.”

“In a coma. They think he’s paralyzed.”

“That’s what we know. Leah’s with him. I needed to see you first.”

“It all got so fucked so fast, Dad.” About halfway through the sentence, Sam felt another outburst surging up his throat, but he choked it off.

“I know, bud. That’s how it goes. But I’m proud as fuck of you. Your quick thinking saved a lot of trouble for sure, and probably lives, too.”

Sam shook his head—and winced when the movement tweaked his neck.

“Yeah, you did,” his father insisted.

But that wasn’t what Sam had been denying. He remembered being in the clubhouse, escaping the toxic waste dump Monty had made of their bunkhouse, catching the headlights before they’d been cut off. He remembered sounding the alarm.

He’d shaken his head because during his emotional eruption in his mom’s arms, a thought had cut its way through his turmoil: *I can’t do this*.

It was his tears themselves that fed the thought. Fitz, Cooper, his father, they were all so stoic. In the midst of what had to be really fucking serious trouble—a traitor, a theft, several men badly hurt, a man *lost*, heat from law, maybe heat from the Volkovs or the Mexicans or both, and who knew what else, the Bulls he’d seen were calm. They were even smiling occasionally. And here he was, bawling his eyes out at the sight of his mommy.

What if he wasn’t cut out to be a Bull? What if he just ... didn’t have it in him?

He’d spent a year working for a patch. He didn’t want to give up. Everything that had decided him on prospecting was still true. And the violence was no surprise; he’d been to enough funerals in his life to know exactly how dangerous life as a Bull could be. Not only dangerous to life and limb, either—they’d lost Dad for five years because of the club.

None of it was a surprise. But he was in this hospital bed feeling scared and unstable in ways he hadn’t felt when he’d

seen those headlights. Now he was halfway to completely falling apart.

What if he couldn't hack it?

The door swung open again, and Maverick came in. He, too, looked weary, but he smiled at Sam. "Hey, Sam. I'm glad to see you looking better."

"Thanks, Uncle Mav. Dad said I look like shit."

Both Mav and Dad chuckled at that. Then Maverick turned to Dad. "Si." He tilted his head at the door.

Dad took hold of Sam's hand. "I gotta go. There's a lot to talk out."

"Okay," Sam said.

Before his father left with Mav, he came around and kissed Mom. A look passed between them that Sam was too fried to try to understand.

When Mom was the only one left in the room with him, she got serious about looking him over. As if she were a doctor or nurse, she checked his neck, his shoulder and chest, the small wounds on his arm, where they'd dug out a couple of pellets.

When she started to lift the covers, he held them down. "My legs are fine, Mom."

"Jesus, Samuel," she muttered as she moved his hand and lifted the covers anyway, verifying for herself that his legs were fine. "You scared the sense straight out of me."

"I'm sorry."

She made a strange, strangled sound that might have been a laugh in a past life. "This life is fucking exhausting sometimes."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

She scooted her butt onto the bed near his hip and picked up his hand. "Don't apologize, Sam. I signed up for this just like everybody else. But sometimes I feel like that mom in *Saving Private Ryan*, with my whole family at risk."

He didn't know the reference, but he got her meaning. It made him want to apologize again—and it gave him another reason to wonder if he was making a mistake, wanting a patch.

Was he the man he thought he was? Was he even a man at all, or was he just a scared kid in way above his head?

~oOo~

Awhile later, when Sam was having trouble keeping his eyes open, Mom kissed his head and told him to sleep, and she'd go check on her brother and Aunt Leah. She waited until he was asleep before she left, so he wouldn't be lonely.

He didn't know how long he'd slept, but he woke with someone shaking his good shoulder, and he opened his eyes to see his father at his side.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, son.” Dad smiled a genuine, unconflicted smile, which cleared Sam's sleep fog up at once, and he saw that the entire Tulsa charter, everyone but Gunner, and Duncan and Christian—he figured they'd stayed back to cover the lockdown—were packed into his small room.

“Hey, everybody,” he muttered, wondering what the hell was going on.

Eight Ball, leaning against the wall by the window, came to the foot of his bed. “Hey, kid.”

“What's goin' on? More trouble?”

Eight chuckled. “That remains to be seen. Excuse the lack of fanfare. This ain't the way we do things, but shit's upside down right now, and we need you in the know. Monty, get up here.”

Monty worked his way through the cluster of Bulls and came to the side of Sam's bed. “Hey, man,” he said to Sam.

A flash of memory went past Sam's eyes—Monty on the ground, unconscious and bleeding. “Hey. You good?”

“Yeah.” Monty touched the back of his head gingerly. “Somebody tried to use my head for a baseball, but I’m alright.”

“Yeah, okay,” Eight said with a burst of impatience. “Let’s get to business.”

Sam tried to understand what was going on. Were he and Monty in trouble? Everybody who’d talked to him said he’d done well. But the whole club was in here, looking ... weird.

Monty seemed just as confused as he was.

“Montgomery Pickett and Samuel Spellman,” Eight growled. “The club has voted and unanimously agreed. Welcome to the mother charter of the Brazen Bulls MC.”

Somber applause broke out in Sam’s hospital room, and it was the weirdest sound Sam had heard in his life. He understood what had just happened, but also, he didn’t understand it at all. Here he was in a hospital bed, with a gash in his neck and holes in his arm and shoulder, thinking maybe he’d made a mistake signing on to prospect, maybe he wasn’t cut out for this life, and now Fitz was handing him a patch and a bottom rocker.

Looking up at Monty, he saw he still wasn’t alone in his stunned confusion.

A thought occurred to Sam, and he said it before considering whether he should. “Wait—you said it was unanimous? Is Uncle Gun awake?”

“No,” Mav answered. “He’s still out, and we can’t wait for him to wake up. But I’ve had his proxy for years. And I knew his vote on this anyway. If Gun had his way, every one of our sons would wear the Bull.”

Gun’s own son, Aidan, wasn’t a Bull and had no interest in being one. He was playing baseball for the University of Oklahoma. If Mav wasn’t exaggerating, Gun must have been hurt and disappointed that his son had chosen a different path. But Sam couldn’t picture Gun disappointed in either of his kids.

The club came up, one by one, to congratulate Sam and Monty. Their prospect days were over. They were Bulls.

His dad waited until the end, then leaned over the bed, took Sam's face in both hands, and said, "I'm fucking proud of you, son."

Sam barely managed a nod in response. He was a Bull. *He was a Bull.*

Did he deserve to be?

~oOo~

A few hours later, Sam sat in a wheelchair at the front of the hospital's small chapel. His neck throbbed and his head pounded, he wasn't far from passing out, but he was too distracted by what was going on to heed his physical discomforts.

Both charters of the Brazen Bulls MC were gathered in this room, the only place in the hospital where so many people could be together and speak without fear that an outsider might be listening.

The Bulls here looked pretty rough. In addition to Sam's injuries, and the thick row of stitches across the back of Monty's head, Geno's right arm was in a complicated looking cast-brace thing. The rest of the Nevada charter and the Tulsa run crew, all of whom had been in that firefight, looked dirty and rumpled and generally knocked around, days later. He didn't think even one of them had left the hospital for a proper rest or even a shower.

And then there was Gunner, who was still in a coma in the ICU. Sam now knew that Gun been in surgery for a long time, and something had gone wrong during the complicated procedure. That, not the actual bullets that had severed his spine and done mischief to several organs, was why he was comatose. The actual bullets were why he would probably never walk again.

All that because he'd turned his back on the fight to save Sam. The guilt Sam felt for that was a greater pain than any caused by his wounds.

Big Ben Haddon was dead, and maybe that, too, was on Sam. He remembered seeing Gun and Ben side-by-side in cover. It was the last thing he remembered before night sky and Athena. Had Gun left Ben exposed as well as himself? All because he was worried about Sam?

Setting aside worries and regrets he could do nothing about, Sam tried to focus on the meeting. He was a Bull now, and despite his inner turmoil, he wanted—needed—to be worthy of the patch.

After that odd, brief 'ceremony' to welcome him and Monty to the table, Eight and Mav—he had to remember to stop calling them 'Uncle' like a little kid now—had briefed them both about what the fuck was going on. Now Sam knew that the cargo they'd transported to Laughlin had been four *anti-tank guided missile launchers*. Each one with a street value of more than half a million dollars.

Dad hadn't expressly told him what the club business was until Sam had told him he wanted to prospect, but all the kids—the older ones, anyway—knew the Bulls ran guns for the Volkovs. It was just a thing you figured out, being part of such a big family where everybody worked the same job and partied together, too. Kids got forgotten when there was a lot going on. Didn't even have to eavesdrop, just had to be present at a party and wait for the booze to kick in.

However, Sam's idea of 'running guns' had been vanloads of shit like Cooper had come down from the loft with during the attack: 9mms and AKs, and ammo and mods for them. Not fucking anti-tank missile launchers. Not actual *artillery* on its way to Mexico and the Águila drug cartel.

Monty and Sam had been carrying full-blown war in the back of the club van—and their attackers had tried to steal it.

Had actually stolen it, in fact, if only briefly. While Sam was lying unconscious on the ground with Fitz trying to stanch the blood pouring from his neck, while Mav had Gunner,

while Reed was with his father, the rest of the Bulls then present had chased down the last surviving asshole and run him off the road about four miles from the compound.

Who were the assholes—and who had they been working for? Those were the main questions under discussion here now. They were all, including Jordan, dead. Six had died in the firefight. Jordan, despite taking Sam's bullet to the chest, had not died then. He and the guy who'd got the van off the compound had died under interrogation.

Cooper, president of the Nevada charter, had just confirmed that it was Hoss Harridan, Clark County sheriff, who'd contracted the hit on the Bulls. The fucking sheriff. The reactions of the Tulsa Bulls to that piece of information ranged from stunned shock to loud fury. The Nevada Bulls greeted the news with weary resignation.

Eight's reaction was the loudest and most furious. He kicked over the lectern and threw a large vase full of fake flowers—which bounced but did not break. "Motherfucker!" he roared—and then he wheeled on Cooper and stormed at him, his limp more pronounced than usual.

"HOW MANY TIMES DO I GOTTA TELL YOU TO GET THE GODDAMN SHERIFF UNDER CONTROL!" he yelled as he cocked his arm.

Cooper blocked the sledgehammer punch with some of his martial arts shit. He knocked Eight back with a flat-hand strike to his chest, looking like John Wick or something. The hit took most of Eight's breath.

"You don't tell me what I gotta do, asshole," Cooper snarled as Eight got his lungs working again. "I'm not your fucking errand boy."

"Enough, both of you," Maverick said quietly. He stepped between them. "There's no point meeting somewhere we know's not wired if you're gonna be so loud they can hear us on the street. Let's settle down and talk like the family we are. Jay, Monty, pick that shit up, please, and set it right. We can't tear apart the goddamn hospital. We're being watched as it is."

More quietly, but no more calmly, Eight snarled at Cooper, “This shit with the sheriff’s been goin’ on almost as long as we’ve chartered here. You say you’re gonna handle it, but when?”

“It’s not that easy, Eight,” Zach, the Nevada SAA, said, stepping forward from the second pew. “Harridan’s reach is long. He’s been building an outlaw empire under cover of his badge, and every crew in the state is caught up in it somehow. We can’t do *shit* alone, and holding together a coalition with the other big crews is fuckin’ impossible. Somebody’s always backing out, or changing the game, or fuckin’ rattin’ us out straight to Harridan. We’re tearing each other down instead of him.”

“*You* picked this location for the charter, Eight,” Cooper said quietly. “It’s outlaw central out here, and it’s a fuckin’ nightmare trying to work around it all.”

“Just kill the motherfucker,” Eight grumbled. “How hard is it to end one fat old asshole?”

“We can’t kill him. He’s got multiple fail-safes in place against that,” Kai said. Kai was their Apollo, in charge of tech and digital intel. “He’s been wearing that star for a long time, and he’s a bastard, not an imbecile. He knows we all want him dead, so he’s got about a dozen different attacks that would deploy if he’s killed. Getting this guy is a real finesse job. We do it wrong, we all go down with him. And we haven’t found the way to do it right yet.”

“Why did he hit us?” Dex asked. “Any guesses?”

“My guess? He meant it as a lesson.” That was Reed. His voice was flat and slightly slurred. He sat in the third pew, next to the aisle, and looked like he was about to fall over. More than two days after the hit, he still wore blood-soaked clothes, and his hair and face were still streaked with it. As Reed hadn’t been hit during the fight, Sam was pretty sure he wore his father’s blood.

Sam turned to his own father; Dad looked weary to his marrow. Tears charged forward in Sam’s head. He blinked and swallowed them away before anybody noticed.

“What kind of a lesson?” Caleb asked.

“We had a plan go south a few weeks back,” Zach explained after a glance with Cooper. “We were four crews working together, months we worked on this job. But one crew was a no-show at the last minute. It left all our asses hanging out. We’ve reached out to the other crews involved, and they got hit the same night we did—but we were the only ones with major cargo on the premises at the time. Harridan didn’t know about that until Jordan hipped him to it, the fucker.”

“The guys who hit us,” Cooper said dully, “were bench players in the crew that bailed. The Cortezes. Harridan flipped ‘em. This is the shit we’re dealing with.”

“And your prospect?” Eight asked, making the word sound like the filthiest insult. “When did he flip? How far does your bullshit have *our* asses hanging out?”

“He was a prospect,” Geno barked. “He didn’t know shit.”

“He knew enough to be point on a fucking multimillion-dollar lift,” Eight pointed out.

Just as it looked like Eight might be ready to punch something again, Jay cleared his throat and stood up. “It’s wack that we just pull the truck into the garage and go party for the night. That’s always felt wrong to me—and this is why. It’s cool to hang out together and all, and I know we gotta work with other people’s schedules, but Jesus, it freaks my shit to have the kind of cargo we’re moving just sitting there, right in the middle of our house, while we drink and smoke and eat and whatever. You ask me, we need a new procedure.”

The room was quiet for a minute while everybody processed that, but nobody engaged with Jay’s idea. Eventually, he sat back down.

Apollo looked to Kai. “What can Tulsa do to help you with the sheriff?”

Kai thought about that for a second, then looked to his president. When Cooper nodded, Kai said, “Volkov needs to get involved. The Bulls don’t have the cred here yet to swing this on our own, not even both charters. We are, by far, the

youngest crew in this game. We don't have the history. But Volkov can swing a big stick.”

Cooper nodded. “If Niko wants his product to sail through the southwest, he needs to dip one of his thousand-dollar loafers into this shit. “

Maverick turned to the Tulsa president. “It's time for Niko to do something for us, Eight. If this is still a partnership, then he needs to pull some weight, too.”

Eight glared at Maverick. He glared at Cooper. He glared at everybody else. Then he heaved a huge, loud sigh. “Yeah. I'll talk to him.”

Sam felt queasy, and he didn't know whether physical injury or existential dread was the cause. Damn, he'd had no idea how very far down the rabbit hole the club was.

He was scared. He was worried. Even with his parents here in Laughlin, he was lonely.

He missed Athena.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Athena was in the clubhouse kitchen, helping Aunt Sage, Aunt Willa, and LaDonna, one of the sweetbutts, assemble approximately four billion pounds of lasagna for dinner. It looked like the lockdown would continue into a third day, and people were getting crabby. They were cooped up, and a lot of people, Athena included, were missing work with this thing.

The old ladies had decided everybody needed comfort food. Kelsey and Aunt Jenny had made cupcakes earlier, for dessert tonight. Duncan had raided the convenience shop for ice cream and candy for the kids. Now lasagna was on the dinner menu.

Somebody—usually Aunt Marcella or Aunt Jenny—had been getting reasonably regular updates from Nevada, so they understood that the club, and Aunt Deb and Aunt Leah, had arrived safely. They knew that Uncle Gun was still in a coma and the prognosis wasn't great so far. At minimum, it looked like he'd never walk again. Monty had gotten off fairly lightly, with a concussion and a gash on his head. Nevada had lost one man and had a couple others injured.

They also knew that Sam had been shot and almost died, but that he'd pulled through and was doing pretty well, considering.

However, Sam had not called yet. Dad had called Mom and talked to them both a couple times. Dex had called Kelsey about a hundred times; Kelsey was seven months pregnant, and he was extra worried about being away. Uncle Mav called often. Uncle Eight called Marcella. Uncle Caleb had called Aunt Ciss. And so on. All the old ladies were either with their men or getting updates from them.

But Sam had not called Athena.

She was trying very hard not to be hurt about that, and she was mostly succeeding. He'd been shot. No doubt he was sore and tired, and probably drugged up. *Of course* he couldn't call

yet. Besides, his parents were there with him, so they were probably the focus of any attention he could muster.

But she needed to see him, to know he really was okay. She wanted to talk to him, too, he always helped her sort through her thoughts and feelings when she had something major going on, and he was the only person in the world she wanted to talk about this pregnancy bullshit with.

But the stuff going on with her wasn't nearly as important as the stuff going on with him. Maybe she wouldn't tell him her stuff at all. Her mom knew and was helping. Sam wasn't in the right place to be worrying about her, or getting angrier at Hunter than he already was. She was angry enough for the whole world, anyway.

Her mom had laid out three different strategies for getting revenge on Hunter. Mom preferred to call it 'justice,' and that was fine, but Athena needed to think of it as revenge. Her anger was pure and motivating, and she didn't want to set it aside and pretend she was after some moral result. No, that piece of used toilet paper masquerading as a person had made her feel helpless and afraid, he'd stolen something from her, he'd tried to fucking gaslight her about it, and now she was pregnant. She wanted him to *hurt*. Period. The only reason she hadn't set Sam and Dad on him was her worry that doing so could cause trouble for them.

Well, there was one more reason, too: she did not want men fighting her battles. She hated feeling helpless, and Hunter had made her feel that way. So she didn't want a man getting her revenge for her, no matter how satisfying that revenge might seem.

Mom's brand of revenge was served over ice. She had a friend who helped her with complicated tech stuff when Dad couldn't, so they didn't have to tell Dad to get his help with that. Mom had already made it impossible for Hunter to get another teaching job within a hundred-mile radius, just by putting the right word out in the right places that he was a predator. She could go even harder and actually insert his name on sex offender rolls, which would make employment

and housing nearly impossible all over the country. Certainly he'd be barred from any teaching jobs.

Athena was wary of that, though; Hunter's father had pull in Tulsa, and if they fucked with official kinds of information, that could be discovered. Or, at least, she worried that it could.

Another idea Mom presented was a social-media rumor campaign, which amounted to starting a few sock-puppet TikTok accounts, posting some carefully worded accusations, and waiting to see how they spread. Mom believed that a man who'd done something like that once had done it before, or soon would. Thus, she figured the sock-puppets would unearth some real women he'd hurt in similar ways.

Athena was skeptical of that one, too, mainly because Hunter dated only Deaf women. His deafness was genetic, with a strong family line straight through several generations on his mother's side. He felt militantly strongly that Deaf culture was important and valuable, and that deafness was not a disability. He'd said on several occasions that he'd wished Athena was genetically deaf, because he wanted to have children with a woman who also had deafness in her genes.

Deaf people were on social media, of course. In fact, social media had provided a wide-open door for Deaf folks to participate in the general culture in new and powerful ways. But Athena's skepticism about her mother's social media plan wasn't about whether other women Hunter had dated were on TikTok and might see the accusations on their FYP. Her concern was that there weren't that many women he might have hurt in similar ways. The pool of single Deaf women of appropriate age in Oklahoma was a puddle. And again, if his father, a lawyer and a political advisor to the mayor, got wind of it, he could make a nasty mess.

So ... no to forging his name on sex offender lists, no to a social media campaign. But Mom's third idea had some potential.

Athena's thoughts were interrupted by her phone vibrating in her pocket. She set the pot of marinara sauce on the range, pulled off the vinyl gloves, and extracted her phone.

Sam! His goofy photo filled her screen.

“It’s Sam!” she signed.

Aunt Sage grinned. “Well, get out of here, then. Tell him we love him.”

“I will.” She answered the call as she left the kitchen.

Blanche padded after her. Athena had taken the dog’s working vest off yesterday and not bothered to put it back on. There was too much commotion in the clubhouse to force her dog to stay on the clock and try to keep aware of it all, and there were plenty of people around to do the hearing Athena couldn’t, anyway.

As soon as Sam’s actual, live face filled her screen, Athena burst into tears. He looked so hurt and sick, and she was so glad to see him!

“Hey,” he signed. “Are those for me? I’m okay, Frodo. I’m okay.”

“I was so scared!” she signed while she fought with her waterworks. She fucking *hated* to cry, but she’d been boo-hooing all over the clubhouse.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he signed, looking sincerely worried about her. *He* was worried about *her*, while *he* was sitting in a hospital bed because he’d been *shot*.

“You look like shit,” she signed. He really did. He was pale and gaunt, a huge bandage covered most of his neck, there were still traces of blood edging his beard, and his hair was up in so many directions he looked like an anime character.

He grinned. “People keep saying that.”

Athena got control of her stupid tears and swiped the wet from her face. “Well it’s true. How are you, really?” She headed up to the crash pads—she wanted a private place to talk, and she’d forgotten her tripod, so she needed a place where she could prop the phone and have both hands free.

“I really am okay. I mean, I’m sore, and I hope you like scars, because they let me look when they came in to change

the bandages, and I'm going to have a couple righteous ones. But I'm okay. My tank's full again, and all my levels look good, whatever that means. No cap, the worst thing is the fucking tube up my dick. That could go away any time." She saw him laugh, and he looked away for a second. "Is that stuff still okay to say to you?"

"What? Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. It's not ... hot ... and that's something we do now. Right? You didn't change your mind?"

He could be such a dope. "Don't be stupid, Samwise. I did not change my mind. I've been *losing* my mind for days, needing to talk to you and see you and make sure you're okay. Because I love you. I'm in love with you. Like I told you. Even when you're a dummy. If you start acting different with me because you think you need to be hot all the time, let me remind you how many times I've popped your back zits for you. There's no point in trying to be hotter than you are, because I know exactly how gross you are."

"Ouch," he signed, grinning.

She laughed. "If it helps, I think you're very hot, back zits and dick tubes notwithstanding."

"Is that new?" he asked.

Athena glanced at her top, a tee from the last year's Field Day at her school. He wasn't talking about that. "Is what new?"

"You thinking I'm hot. Is that new?"

"I have eyes, Samwise. I've had them since I was born, and they've always worked fine."

His color improved suddenly and markedly. He was blushing. His hands came up and went down a few times as he tried to think how to respond.

Athena let him off the hook. "I guess it's like that thing you told Lark when she asked if you thought I was pretty. What did you tell her?" She remembered, but she wanted to see him tell her again.

“That I know you’re beautiful.”

“Me too. I’ve known how beefcake you are for a long time. It just means something more now.”

“I miss you so fucking much, Athena. I wish you were here.”

“Me too. I tried to come, but they wouldn’t let me.”

“No, it’s not ...” He gave up that sentence, swiped it away, and started again. “It’s good you’re not here. I guess I should say I wish I was there instead—because *that* is really fucking true.”

“Me too. I want to hold you. I want you to put your head in my lap so I can pet your hair.”

His eyes fluttered closed for a second. “That sounds perfect. But there’s other stuff I want to do, too. More of the stuff we did the night before I left, and more stuff than that.”

Telling him that she’d tried to go to him had reminded her of the conversation she’d had with his mom, and his comment pulled that memory to the top. “Your mom saw us that night. When we said goodbye.”

His grin returned. “I know. She told me. And she told Dad, too. They both know. They’re happy about it. Too happy about it, if you ask me. Like they’re taking credit. Have you told anybody?”

Athena thought about all the secrets she suddenly had. Her parents didn’t know about her and Sam—not yet, anyway, though that might change very soon, now that Aunt Deb and Uncle Simon both knew. Only Sam and her mom knew what Hunter had done. Nobody but her mom knew that she was now pregnant. It all felt twisted and tangled into one huge snarl of a lie.

Except for fibs told in kindness, dishonesty made Athena feel guilty and unclean. Her parents stressed honor and trust *so hard*. When she was growing up, there was literally nothing she could do to make them more disappointed in her, to earn a more severe consequence, than lie to them. She could tell them anything, ask any question, confess any rule-breaking, push

any boundary, and they would sit with her and talk it calmly out. There might be consequences handed down, but they were always related to the thing she'd done. But if she got caught in a lie—and Mom and Dad were both eerily good at knowing—that was how she got actually *punished*.

She'd figured that out while she was still in grade school, and she hadn't tried to lie her way out of trouble thereafter. More to the point, she'd thoroughly learned the lesson about the importance of honor and trust and how fully melded to them honesty was. She felt like a terrible person when she lied. And now, here she was, trapped in a knot of secrets. None of them were outright lies yet, but the ground was crumbling under that technicality.

She wanted to tell Sam about being pregnant, but she couldn't, not now. He was wounded and obviously weak. He didn't need any additional stressors in his life—and he couldn't do anything about it, anyway.

When all this was over and he was home, she could tell him. She and Mom had talked strategy about this problem, too, so Athena had a plan to make an appointment in Overland Park, Kansas to have an abortion. She'd have to stay up there a couple days. Mom wanted to take her, but that would require a lie for Dad.

Athena wanted Sam to take her, if he could. She had a little time to wait for him to be able to do that. But she couldn't tell him now.

“I haven't told anybody,” she answered him. “I want to tell my folks, though.”

“Might has well, Frodo. Monty figured it out, too, watching me FT with you. Apparently I get a goofy smile on my face thinking about you, and he saw me signing with you, and put it together. I told him to keep his mouth shut, but you know he won't. I don't actually care if he tells anybody. I want to be out in the open with you.”

“Me too. This might be weird, but I kind of feel like nothing's changed, even though everything has.”

“I get it. I feel like I’ve been in love with you longer than I knew.”

“Yeah. Same.”

“I guess we’re pretty dumb.”

“I don’t know. I think we’re smart. If we’d figured it out a long time ago, maybe we never would have been with anybody else, and maybe we would have wondered about that. Now we know what’s out there, and we know this is better.”

He watched her through the phone for a moment, until his eyes flashed up, above the camera. His mouth moved—she thought he’d said *okay*—and then he looked at her again.

“The nurse is here. They want to take me for some kind of test. I guess I have to go.”

“Okay. I love you so much, Samwise. Call me whenever you can, as much as you want. Okay?”

“You’re going to get sick of me.”

“Never. Never ever.”

“I love you. It feels so good to say that and mean it like I do.”

Feeling like she might cry again, Athena only blew him a kiss.

~oOo~

The lockdown was called off late the following morning. Most of the club’s close friends and associates, and anybody who needed to get back to a job, left right away, but most of the old ladies, older kids, and sweetbutts spent the rest of the day returning the clubhouse to some kind of order.

Then the old ladies had something of a church session of their own. The Tulsa charter was staying in Laughlin until Ben Haddon, the Nevada VP, was buried. Duncan and Chris were heading west to join the Bulls, and the women were deciding

who among them would go. Willa was definitely going; Ben's daughter was engaged to Zach, Willa's oldest son. Jenny and Cissy were going. And Marcella. The rest of the old ladies were staying to mind the home front.

Athena wasn't an old lady—although Sam had his patch now, which she'd learned from her *mother*, because he hadn't told her himself in either of their calls, the dope—so she wasn't invited to be part of that discussion. She wanted to go to Laughlin, but her mother wouldn't consider it, and Sam didn't want her there, either. Apparently there was still some danger in Nevada. Knowing that did nothing to ease her mind about Sam being there. Or her father. Or anybody else she loved.

When their discussion started to become an argument, Mom pointed out that they had business of their own to attend to, and that Dad being away gave them room to handle it cleanly, without having to lie or dodge.

Thus, when they finally got home, Mom ordered Greek for dinner, and they sat together at the kitchen table and discussed Athena's revenge on Hunter.

The plan was simple and didn't require any lawbreaking or even hacking. Mom knew of a local underground company that specialized in a very particular kind of fuckery: everything from practical jokes to pranks that bordered on actual torture. They even sold package deals for prolonged mischief.

The bulk of her mother's private investigation work dealt with troubled marriages and divorces. Lots of cheating spouses and the like. Athena found it incredibly demoralizing to know the extent to which people who'd vowed to love and cherish each other for the rest of their lives could end up being astonishingly shitty to each other instead, but Mom had a level attitude about it all, maybe because she'd been doing her job for more than thirty years.

When someone learned their supposed life partner had been fucking their way across the Great Plains, they were usually both devastated and furious. Most wanted not only a divorce but payback. Mom had figured out that giving them a

legal option for revenge that was much speedier and sleeker than the divorce proceedings would be tended to cool the hottest expressions of anger and stave off any intention for actual violence.

This company, for example, would deliver—anonymously and untraceably—a box full of bedbugs to the home of the ‘revengee.’ Just that one box would wreak plenty of havoc. But if that wasn’t enough, you could do a package deal and get a box of lice sent the next week, and maybe termites after that.

Perhaps vermin wasn’t your revenge kink. The company had options themed for terror, shock, torment, public embarrassment, and more. They also had playful prank options, like glitter bombs and creepy-clown-o-grams.

When Mom had brought this idea up at the clubhouse, it had seemed more promising than the others, but they hadn’t had the opportunity to dig into it. Sitting here in their own house, going through the website—which was buried deep in another site; this wasn’t a company that, like, did a lot of advertising—Athena was underwhelmed. These things seemed mean, but not really *vengeful*. Honestly, they seemed passive-aggressive and cowardly. Not all that much different from TP-ing his house.

“He raped me and made me pregnant, Mom. I don’t want to send him a gag gift.”

Mom’s shoulders did that lift-and-drop thing that signaled an impatient sigh. “These are our options, Athena. You don’t want to drag him online, and I get it—unless you out yourself, we’ll have to invent something, and that could have consequences down the road. You don’t want to alter the sex offender list, and yeah, that’s not my favorite, either. I don’t mind skirting the line, but I don’t like to cross it, and that would be outright illegal. The club does all the outlaw shit we can manage. This is what’s left.”

“It’s not enough.”

Mom regarded her for a long time. “You want to hurt him. Physically.”

Athena nodded. “He hurt me.”

“I know, starlight.” Mom reached out and cupped Athena’s cheek. “It makes me sick that he did it, and I want to hurt him, too. But I don’t want the fallout for you. Or anybody. As you say, his father has pull. I don’t know how to hurt him and protect you, and all of us.”

“Dad would.” Athena’s hands shook as she signed that.

Again, Mom stared until Athena felt squirmy. “You said you didn’t want that.”

“I don’t want him, or Sam, or any of our family hurt doing something for me. And I want to do it for myself. But it’s like there’s just no way to be both safe and satisfied.”

That made her mother smile grimly. “No, baby, there’s not. There never has been. That’s why I don’t like to call it revenge. You’ll never get revenge, if what you mean is to cancel out the hurt done to you. That will never happen. You will *not* feel less hurt because you’ve hurt him back. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t hurt him back. Justice is an earned consequence, so he doesn’t get away with it. Maybe losing his job is enough.”

“It’s not,” Athena replied at once. “Not even close.”

“You could report what he did. Officially, I mean. To law.”

Athena goggled at her mother. “No. Absolutely not.”

“No, I didn’t think so. And I agree. The stats for finding justice the legal way are horrible. And Hunter’s too connected, anyway. I just figured it had to be said out loud. It is, technically, an option.”

“Not for me.”

“Okay. Well, personally, I’d be glad for your father to know. I hate these secrets, and ...” She stopped, let her hands fall to the table, and stared out the French doors. When she returned her attention to Athena, her eyes sparkled with denied tears. “Fuck, starlight. I want to be able to talk to him about this. Because you’re our *baby*. You are the most precious thing in the world to me—to *us*. I’m a boiling pot of rage about what

that shitty little toad did to you, and trying not to dump that all over you is hard. I need my guy.”

Again, Athena felt her throat fill with tears. Cripes, she’d been crying so much lately. It sucked. “Sorry, Mama,” she signed.

“Don’t be sorry. This should be your call. Start to finish, it’s *your* call. But if you want advice from your mom, let’s bring your dad in. He knows how to get the justice you want, and stay as safe as he can doing it.”

Athena nodded. She had tried to find another way, but this was the only way to do it right. “I told him if he quit at the school, I wouldn’t tell Dad.”

Mom smiled—and oh, Athena knew that smile. It had never been directed at her, but she’d seen it turned toward some people who were about to have a very bad day. “Then I’ll tell him.”

“I don’t want anybody to get in trouble because of me. And I don’t want to get pushed out of the equation, either. I still want a say.”

“As for the first part, we won’t have to ask your father to handle it. As soon as he knows what happened, he’ll want to handle it. His choice. That means it’s not on you if there’s trouble. As for having a say, well ... I think you need to decide if you want justice or control. You might have to give up one to get the other.”

“That sucks. It happened to *me*.”

“I know it sucks. But it’s true. If you want your dad involved because he can get it done without putting himself or any of us at risk, then you need to let him decide how that gets done.” Mom leaned close and locked eyes with her. “*This* is where you have control, Athena—it’s your call now. If you let the club handle it, that’s you making the call. Understand?”

Athena thought she did, but she took a beat to think it through. Mom was saying that telling Dad—which would, of course, mean involving the whole club to at least some degree, and would also mean everybody would know—was her

decision. Making that decision was her control, but the decision would be to hand control over. Not have it taken from her, but handing it over.

That was still her decision, her involvement. And whatever was done to Hunter would be done by people who loved her, who were enraged on her behalf.

He would pay what he owed.

She thought she could live with that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The door was ajar, but Sam knocked on it anyway.

“Yes, come in!” Aunt Leah called. Her voice carried; she wasn’t trying to be quiet.

Feeling shaky for more reasons than having been shot, Sam pushed the door open. “Hey. Can I visit for a while?”

“Of course, honey,” Aunt Leah said. Then she turned to Uncle Gun, on his back in the bed, the head barely raised. “It’s Sam, baby.”

“Hey, Sam,” Gunner said in a raspy mumble. “Get over here, kiddo.”

Sam went to the bed. There were so many machines in an arc around the head of the bed, Sam couldn’t get much closer than Gun’s legs. One large machine, a ventilator, sat behind the bed, no longer in use.

Gunner was pasty white except for the charcoal-dark skin just beneath his eyes, like fresh bruises. He was fastened into a brace of some kind. It was mostly under his hospital gown, but it seemed to encase most of his torso, up to his neck. The bullets had severed his spine near his lower back; Sam wasn’t sure why the brace went up so high. His medical training ended somewhere around how to apply a Band-Aid, so what did he know.

Sam gripped Gunner’s hand where it lay on the covers; it was cool and dry. Relief fluttered through his heart as Gunner squeezed back.

“Hey, Unc. How’re you doin’?”

“I suck, kiddo. But I’m an old bastard, so it’s okay. I’m glad to see you up and running—and in street clothes, too. They spring you from this joint?”

“This morning, yep. Still got stitches in a few places, but I’m free.”

Gunner flapped his hand, indicating Sam's neck. "I saw that one when it was fresh. Scared the unholy fuck outta me, kiddo."

"Sorry, Unc. You saved my life. I'm sorry doing that fucked yours up so bad."

"Shut the fuck up, Samuel. This is *not* your fault. I remember enough, and I've heard enough since I woke up, to know you saved us all that night. I would do exactly the same thing even knowing up front what would happen to me." Gun's eyes grew watery, and Sam felt a lump swell at the back of his throat. "Seeing you on your feet, looking so strong, when I thought you were *dying*? That's worth it, Sam. Every fuckin' time."

At the other side of the bed, Leah sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Not knowing what else to say, Sam said, "You'll walk again, Unc. And ride. I know you will."

Gun smiled, but it was one of those smiles that meant the opposite. "Doesn't look like it. The doc says there's too much damage. The connections or whatever won't grow back. Bottom half's not talking to the top half anymore."

"He'll be able to ride, though," Leah said. "Mav's already working on plans to mod a bike for a wheelchair."

Before Sam could respond to that interesting idea, Gun grunted with obvious distaste. "Yeah, I don't know about that. Don't much see how that'll be different than those scooters old grandmas use to tear around Walmart."

"Well, a modded Harley would be way cooler than that," Sam said. "And, you know, street legal."

Another dismissive grunt. "We'll see. Can't even fuckin' sit up yet." He turned a plaintive look on his wife. "I wanna go home, Lee. I gotta get home. I need home. I need the kids."

Leah brushed his grey hair from his pallid, sweat-sheened forehead. "I know, baby. I know. We're working on it."

Gunner started to cry. When Leah curled over his head to hold him, Sam knew it was time to go. He backed away and eased from the room.

He was halfway to the elevators when Leah called his name. He turned and met her halfway. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her cheeks a bit damp, as if she'd only just wiped away a fresh spate of tears. She put her arms up, and he walked into her embrace.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled against her shoulder. Guilt lashed through him with every beat of his heart. Each one of those heartbeats came at the expense of his uncle's fucking *legs*.

"Hush, Sam. Hush. He meant it—he'd do it again, even knowing what would happen to him. That doesn't mean it's easy now. Just that it's worth it." She pushed him back and clasped his cheeks. "He *loves* you. And he's still here. That's what's important. You just had a conversation with him. I can kiss him and hold his hand. Our children still have him in their lives. *That's* what's important. A wheelchair will be hard to get used to, but he'll get used to it. We all will. A modded bike sounds like defeat right now, but he'll see. He just needs time."

Her expression narrowed to her 'teacher look.' "But don't you *dare* minimize his sacrifice for you by feeling guilty about it. It's not a thing you did wrong. It's a thing he did right."

~oOo~

Late that afternoon, Sam rode with his father in Mom's SUV to the clubhouse. They left Mom at the Airbnb house they'd booked for them and Aunt Leah.

When the rest of the Tulsa Bulls had arrived in Laughlin, during the lockdown, they'd all stayed in the clubhouse, together and defended as if in a war—which, at the time, they figured they were in, without being entirely certain of their foes.

Sam had missed all that and had heard about it after the fact. Now he knew that the sheriff was behind the hit, and he also understood that Niko Volkov had gotten involved. He wasn't sure what the Russian had done, but the lockdown had ended, and most of the Bulls had decamped to their own homes, if they were Laughlin Bulls, or to more comfortable accommodations if they were Tulsa. Tulsa meant to stay in town until Ben was buried.

Today, both charters would meet in the Laughlin chapel for a complete debrief—it would be Sam's first time at the table, wearing a patch. His father had sewn his patch and rocker on for him while he was in the hospital.

“You're quiet,” his old man said. “You feelin' okay?”

Physically he felt mainly normal, except for a few sore spots. His neck itched like a fucker, and he was tired of not being able to move it without the stitches pulling. But those were minor complaints.

The thing making him contemplative on this trip was a massive case of nerves.

“Yeah, I'm good. But—” He faltered, not sure he had the balls to say the rest.

Dad didn't let him off the hook, though. “But?”

He knew he could talk to his father and get good sense without judgment. Knowing that didn't make it any easier to say. “I'm ... scared, Dad.”

His father glanced over with a frown. “Of what? Being at the table?”

Sam nodded.

Dad pulled into the next parking lot—for a strip mall—and parked. After he cut the engine, he shifted on the seat to look at Sam directly. Still frowning. “I thought you wanted this.”

“I do ...”

“But?”

Sam had been thinking about this for days, but he still needed a minute to put those thoughts into something he could say. “I ... don’t want to say I didn’t understand what it would be like. I mean, I knew. I was here to see the Perro years, and other stuff. I heard stories, and saw shit. I’ve understood what the club is as long as I can remember. But ... I don’t know. I guess I didn’t know what *I* would be when I was part of that.”

His father frowned at him, perfectly still, and said nothing, like he was waiting for the end of the story.

So Sam continued and said the scary part. “What if I’m not good enough? What if I’m not brave or smart enough to do my part when it gets hot like that?” His throat tightened, and he swallowed. “Fuck, Dad. I feel like I’m just a kid.”

That made his father chuckle softly. “I know. I feel like you’re just a kid, too. But you’re not. You’re a man, Sam. A *good* man. And you’ve got a good, calm head on your shoulders.” He looked out the windshield for a moment, focused on the passing traffic. “You know, it’s a mixed bag for me and your mom, you taking that patch, knowing Mason wants to follow right at your heels. We want you safe and happy and living a long life. When we got the word you’d been shot ...”

He drifted off without finishing, but his head dropped as he shook it.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

Raising his head, Dad fixed Sam with a laser stare. “No. Don’t do that. You’ve chosen the life you want to live. Is that still true? You want this life?”

“I do. I just ... I need to be good at it. I don’t want to fuck up and get anybody else hurt. Or worse.”

“There’s no guarantee you won’t fuck up. Everybody makes mistakes, and mistakes have consequences. More to the point, everybody makes choices, and sometimes we gotta make a choice even if we know it’s got trouble attached. The thing you want to avoid is *being a fuckup*—somebody who

doesn't think first, who doesn't care about consequences. You've never been that guy a day in your life."

He reached across the console and clasped Sam's shoulder. "You will be good at this, son. You already are. Everybody who was here the other night says you are the reason we didn't lose that van."

"But calling it out is why Uncle Gun's paralyzed and Big Ben is dead. What if they would have just taken the van and left everybody sleeping?"

"Samuel. Now I know you're looking for a reason to blame yourself. You know what was in that van. If it had been stolen from us, not one Bull, not one member of our family, would be safe. That was millions of dollars in cargo, headed from a Russian mobster to a Mexican druglord. That's not a thing you just write a check for. That's the sort of thing that takes payback out in blood. A lot of blood. You did the right thing—and you were smart enough to see the trouble right away. You know this, bud. I know you do. Why are you *trying* to feel bad about this? Is it Gun?"

Sam sighed and studied his hands. "He got hurt saving me."

"Yeah, he did. And it sucks. His life is gonna change a lot. But understand this, son: Gun knows the risks of this life. Far better than you. He's taken hard hits before, because this life is full of hard hits. But he loves this life anyway. Maybe more than anybody at our table, Gunner *loves* being a Bull. The risks, the pain, the damage—even the grief—it's worth it. If the life is right for you, if the good is the good you need, then the bad is worth it." Dad smiled. "You didn't see me hang up my kutte after I got out of Beaumont. Those were five hard years, and that stint changed me. I know it was hard on your mom and you and Mace, too. But you gotta stick with what you love. You don't bail when it gets hard—that's when you *fight*. This is our family, Sam. It's worth the fight."

Several blocks slipped into place in Sam's mind, and he chuckled softly.

"What's funny?" his dad asked.

“Not funny. Just ... like I finally got hold of something I’ve been reaching for. I was thinking about something Aunt Leah said earlier today. She told me not to apologize for what happened to Uncle Gun because feeling guilty ... I guess ... makes it seem like I did something wrong and not that he did something right.”

Dad grinned. “That is definitely Leah logic. And she’s right. It should be about thanks, not blame. Because it’s what we do for the people we love.”

~oOo~

The Laughlin chapel was cramped, with both charters of the Brazen Bulls wedged in around the table, but it was quiet. As tightly packed as they were, the shadows of those missing cast a pall over the room: Ben, whom they would bury the next day. Gunner, who would be in a hospital bed for weeks if not months. And Jordan. The Nevada prospect had never had a seat at this table, but his betrayal had caused their losses. His shadow hung heaviest.

Sitting at the far end of the table, between Jay and Monty, Sam tried not to scratch at his neck. He also tried not to look as overwhelmed as he felt. So far, nothing about being a Bull was as he’d expected, because nothing about the way he’d been made a Bull was normal.

Cooper opened the meeting not with a gavel—there wasn’t one on this table—but with a sigh. “We got a couple things to talk about as a whole. But first, let’s take a beat and give Sam and Monty their due. The two newest Bulls aren’t getting the party they probably expected. They’re getting a wake instead.”

Geno laughed darkly. “That’s the way we do it in Nevada, boys.” A few other grim laughs answered him. Sam wasn’t sure what he meant, or what the joke was.

Eight gave Geno a look that made it clear he got the humor but didn’t appreciate it. He turned the same look on Cooper

before he said, “You boys’ll get a proper party when we get home.”

Sam nodded and sensed Monty do the same. Then the guys congratulated them in some way, with a nod or a grin, a good word or a pat on the back. Eight sat in his seat with his arms crossed, continuing to look pissed.

Cooper appeared to be intentionally ignoring Eight’s mood. “Okay,” he said. “We’ve got two things for us all to discuss together. First is where we are with the shitshow that happened last week. Then we’ll lay out the plan for putting Ben to rest.

Zach, who would wear the VP flash for Nevada after Ben was put to rest, cleared his throat. He cast a glance across the table, to Reed. When Reed nodded, Zach told Cooper, “Lyra has some ...” He sighed and started again. “There’s some ... complication, I guess, with Melody.”

“Who’s that?” Eight asked.

“My mom,” Reed answered. “She’s on her way out here. And ... uh ... she’s upset. When my mom’s upset, things tend to get complicated.”

Cooper chuckled quietly. “I remember.”

“No, you don’t,” Reed countered. “You’ve seen her jealous. You haven’t seen her like this. She will make a scene. I can promise you that. She might well try to make trouble.”

“Then she can’t come,” Eight said—and Cooper whipped his head around to glare at him.

“Not your call,” Cooper snarled.

“She’s our mom,” Reed said. “And Pop—” His voice cut out and he stopped. His head dropped. He didn’t try to continue.

Zach picked up for him. “Ben loved her. He never stopped loving her as hard as he ever did. He’d want her here. Reed, Lyra, and I will stay on her, make sure she doesn’t actually cause a problem. We just wanted to give everybody a heads-up.”

“Fair enough,” Cooper said. “We’ll all try to keep things level tomorrow. But let’s set details for the funeral aside. We can give Ben a proper sendoff because we’re safe enough to do it. Volkov came through, but it’ll cost us. Eight, you talked to him. You wanna pick this up?”

Eight leaned forward. “The sheriff is not a problem anymore. He’s announcing his immediate retirement Monday morning. Ted Fulton is taking the badge until the election. Ted’s Niko’s choice, so we can bet when the next election rolls around, it’ll go to him.”

“Ted’s Mojave,” Kai said. “He worked the rez force for almost twenty years before he went to the sheriff’s office. He’ll want his due, but he’ll play nice—and he won’t play Harridan’s fucking games.”

“What, Volkov fixed a two-year problem with one phone call?” Monty asked, grinning. “Shit, we should let him handle all our bullshit.”

“No, Monty,” Maverick said. “We don’t want that.”

“Niko wants his due, too,” Eight said. “And he fuckin’ *charges*.”

“What’s the fee on this?” Jay asked.

“He wants the Bulls in California in the new year,” Maverick said. “He didn’t give a hard deadline yet, but he wants us moving on the Nameless and patching them over before 2024 is out of its diaper.”

An obvious tension went around the table at that, but Sam didn’t understand why that was a bad thing. The club had been working on a patch-over in Eureka, California for at least as long as he’d been a prospect. He didn’t know details, but he’d heard enough to know about the plan. So Volkov wanted something that was already in the works? How was that a heavy price?

“The Nameless balked, though,” Fitz said, answering the question Sam hadn’t asked aloud. “They voted against it. We’re starting over.”

“No, we’re not,” Maverick said quietly.

Eight sighed. “The vote was close to fifty-fifty, and their bylaws only require a majority for any vote. They only need to move a couple noes to the other column. So right now, we’re gonna push for a fresh vote and give ‘em a little time to get it to go the right way.”

“If they don’t?” Chris asked.

“Then we take them by force,” Eight answered.

“That’s not a good patch-over,” Lonnie, Nevada’s new Sergeant at Arms, pointed out. “How’re we gonna trust men we forced a patch on?”

“We’re not forcing a patch on anybody, Lon,” Cooper told his man.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I know I’m gonna sound like an asshole who doesn’t deserve to sit here, but I’m very confused.”

His father gave him a paternal smile. “It’s okay, son. This is a snarled mess, and it’s changed so much and had so much bullshit in it, hardly anybody can keep it straight.”

“We’ll lay the whole story out for you and Monty when we get home,” Eight said. “The important thing we need to focus on here is ... yeah. They don’t vote right next time, we’re tearing the Nameless down. Volkov style.”

“*Fuck*,” Caleb grunted.

“We’re crew killers, boys,” Cooper responded grimly.

“Couldn’t we find another club to patch over?” Reed asked. “I know we said starting from scratch like we did is too hard—and I agree, it’s been one problem after another—but I don’t see how a hostile takeover is an improvement. Why not see if we can make a deal with another club? One that’s into it?”

“We don’t got time for that shit now,” Eight said.

“Anyway, the Nameless was the right call. They have a huge footprint in Eureka,” Jazz said. “In all of NorCal, really. They were the Big Daddy back in the weed heyday. We want their footprint. Frankly, the shit we’ve seen about these guys, I

hope they don't vote right. They were fucking brutal, and they don't color inside the lines. Don't cry over these assholes. Most of 'em are very bad motherfuckers and deserve every bit of what they'll get. The cred for putting them in the ground won't hurt, either."

"We're out of time and out of choices, brothers," Eight said. "Tulsa and Laughlin both need to get ready to ride to Eureka after the holidays and make a little war."

Sam's dad cleared his throat. "I know I'm not saying anything most of us here aren't thinkin', but it needs to be said out loud. This shit is starting to feel like how we landed in the mess with the Perros. I know I missed the worst of it, but that's because I got caught up in it myself. We need our eyes open, brothers."

"You're right, Si," Eight said. "Everybody's thinkin' it. You got any wisdom that might actually help?"

With a subtle chuckle and a shake of his head, Dad let the question fade away without an answer.

That chuckle with the lowered head-shake was familiar to Sam. It was a sign both he and Mason had come to fear, and the one thing that could shift Mom from disagreeing with Dad to flat-out fighting with him. Such a subtle collection of gestures, but it meant that Dad was at the end of his tether, and he had completely dismissed whomever he was talking to. When Sam or Mason got him to that place, they were about to lose an important privilege or something they cared about—or get some seriously awful chore as punishment. When Mom was on the receiving end of that look, Sam and Mason headed for the hills because the 'rents were about to have a barn-burner of a fight.

Sam felt a little nauseated, and he didn't think it was lingering effects of his injuries. He'd never seen the Bulls—his father, his uncles, his friends, his *family*—so much at odds before. Sure, he'd seen plenty of arguments and quite a few drunken fights, not counting the bouts in the club ring that sometimes seemed more therapeutic than recreational, but

he'd never seen them truly angry and in conflict before. Resentment simmered barely below the surface of the table.

Nothing about being a Bull was like he'd imagined.

Except getting shot.

~oOo~

They put Ben to rest the next afternoon. A Bulls funeral was something Sam was very familiar with, and this one was little different. They started in the clubhouse, for Bulls and family only. Lonnie, Kai, and Geno did what Sam assumed was a Mojave ritual. Melody, Ben's ex-wife, was there, and she was definitely dramatic, wailing loudly all over the clubhouse and literally throwing herself over the top of Ben's casket. Sam wondered why two people who apparently loved each other so much had divorced, but it wasn't his business.

Lyra and Reed were quiet and stoic, focused on managing their mom. Zach kept close to Lyra, and Sam saw them disappear a few times—he figured Lyra needed some time away to feel her own grief.

After the Bulls' private rituals were over, they rode out to the cemetery, where a hundred or more mourners were waiting. Many, but not all, were on bikes, showing colors from several different clubs, including some Sam had never heard of. All the remaining members of the Nevada Bulls were his pallbearers, except Geno, whose shoulder was still in a brace. Jay took the sixth position instead.

Lyra gave her father's eulogy. She read from regular sheets of paper, and they shook in her hand, but her voice was steady.

Sam's only impression of Ben was a crabby older guy. He always looked angry, even when he was laughing. But in his daughter's sweet words and shaking hands, Sam understood that her father had been a real good guy. Maybe not a *nice* guy. Definitely not walking the straight and narrow. But a good person. Somebody who knew how to love.

A little like his own father—though Dad wasn't grumpy. Just quiet.

After Ben's casket was lowered to the ground, everybody went back to the clubhouse for the wake.

Not everybody. Reed bailed. Sam heard somebody ask Cooper where Reed was, and his answer was simply, "He's feeling it the way he needs to feel it."

Sam had barely known Ben, but he felt low and lonely. Several more old ladies had made the trip from Tulsa to be here for the funeral, but Athena wasn't among them. They'd been in touch throughout every day, and he didn't blame her for not coming, but god, he missed her. So fucking much.

It didn't feel so different from the way he'd always missed her when they were apart, or when he was hurting, except that now the comfort he imagined if he could be with her was deeper. More ... complete. Now they were everything to each other.

Actually, they'd always been everything to each other.

He slipped away to a bunkhouse. He needed to see her, and FaceTime was all he had right now.

~oOo~

"How was it?" Athena asked.

"It's still going on. The wake, anyway. It's ... sad. I didn't know him much, but I've got all the funerals we've been to in my head. Mainly I've been thinking of Uncle Beck. I think that was the one that I felt hardest."

"Me too," she answered. "That was the worst for me, too. Of our family, at least. It hurt to lose my Grandpa Bill, too. A lot. And my Grandma Maeve."

She meant her mom's dad and her dad's mom. Apollo's father had died when Athena was too young to remember him, and Jacinda's mother had been kind of aloof and chilly. But

Bill had been a goofy dad-joke kind of grandfather, and Maeve a cookie-baking, cuddly-soft grandma.

The only grandparents Sam had ever known were Grammo and Grampa D. His mom's parents were both dead well before he'd popped onto the scene, and his dad was thoroughly estranged from his folks. Grammo and Grampa D were plenty, though—and he'd gotten to coast in Athena's wake with her bonus grandparents.

"I miss you so much, Samwise. This is the longest we've ever been apart. I'm going crazy."

"Me too. It makes what we talked about in the field, what we did, almost feel like it didn't really happen." He laughed. "I'm starting to feel like I dreamed it all up."

Athena grabbed her phone and brought it close to her face, so her exaggerated expression of anger filled the screen entirely. Then she propped the phone again and signed, "Don't talk like that! You didn't dream it up. It's real. *We're* real. We just haven't had a chance to enjoy it fully yet."

"I really want to enjoy it fully."

She gave him a dreamy, extremely suggestive smile. "Me too. I think about it all the time."

"Not me."

Her sexy smile gave way to another, more real frown. "No?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I told you—I don't want to imagine it. I want to experience all of it like it's exactly as it should be when I can really touch you. I don't want any expectations ahead of time. I just want you."

"You are a romantic hobbit, Samwise Gamgee."

"And you're my Rosie. Might have to change your name."

"No you don't. I have been your Frodo since we were five years old."

"Frosie. That's who you are now. You're my Frosie. Best friend and love of my life, all rolled into one. Best of all

worlds.”

Smiling pertly, Athena considered that. “I’ll allow it.”

“We need a sign for it.”

She thought for a moment, then combined the signs for *rose* and for *Frodo*. “How’s that?”

Sam made the sign himself. “Perfect. Frosie.”

Athena leaned in and kissed her screen.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

More than two weeks.

That was how long Sam had been away when the whole charter finally convoyed back to Tulsa. They arrived on a clear, crisp fall afternoon, and all the family who'd stayed behind was ready to greet them like returning heroes.

By now, everybody knew that Athena and Sam's relationship had ... changed. Athena hadn't quite figured out how to describe what had happened between them. Everybody who heard seemed perfectly content to say their relationship was now more—they were *more* than best friends, or they weren't *only* best friends anymore. But she didn't like to say it, or think it, like that. Being best friends wasn't something incomplete. There was no *more* it could be. It was not an *only* thing, either. They couldn't love each other any more than they always had. It was simply that now there was a new physical dimension, and an exclusivity that was new.

It wasn't a more, or an only. It was an *also*. They were best friends, as they'd always been. Now they were also lovers. Or would be, if he would get his ass home.

The Bulls weren't stopping at the clubhouse first but at Tulsa County Hospital. The convoy included an ambulance; the club was bringing Uncle Gun home. So the welcoming party met them there.

As the club roared onto the hospital campus, everyone waiting went out to stand under the long awning over the sidewalk. There was a bustle of excitement; their men—and some of their women—were finally home, after all. But the bustle was more subdued than it would have been if the riders could have gone straight to the clubhouse.

Athena had been privy to enough conversation in the past two weeks to know that the Bulls had left Laughlin pretty much the second Gunner's doctors had said they would approve it—but that didn't mean they'd waited until those doctors were *comfortable* with him riding so far in an

ambulance or setting up in a motel room each night on the way. They'd wanted him in their care for at least another week.

But Gunner wasn't having that. He was desperate to get home. He had weeks more to go in the hospital, and the Tulsa Bulls had to get back home. He hadn't wanted to be left behind. So they hadn't left him behind.

In formation, they all swung into the curved drive that provided the drop-off at the Emergency entrance. Aidan and Larissa, holding hands with Grammo, stepped out in front.

Maverick and Eight Ball rode out ahead of the ambulance; the rest of the club rode behind. Willa's SUV, carrying the old ladies, and the club van brought up the rear. Sam was in that van.

As the riders dismounted, they went to their families. There were fiercely emotional hugs, but everybody was, for the moment, quiet. Athena moved down to the edge of the group as Sam climbed out of the van. He was smiling right at her.

He looked perfect. Strong and healthy and like himself, except for the white strip of bandage on one side of his neck.

"Hey Frosie," he signed as he stepped onto the sidewalk.

Athena simply raised her arms.

He came in and swept his strong arms around her, holding her to his chest as he lifted her from the ground.

She cupped her hands over his cheeks—his beard had grown in full again!—and kissed him.

Kissing Sam now was a wholly new experience, even from their other kisses. Their first few, that night under the stars, had been a little strange and awkward, as they navigated newly understood feelings and set aside ideas about who they had been to each other. Not brother and sister anymore.

Now, two weeks later, they'd been apart the whole time, but in that time, they'd settled in more to how things were—how maybe they'd always been meant to be. Athena was

completely comfortable in the notion that Sam was her person in all ways. He said he hadn't been imagining all the things they would do together now, but Athena certainly had. Thinking about Sam helped erase Hunter and cool her rage so she could function around it.

And now he was here, and already she felt better. Stronger. Calmer. Happier.

They ended the kiss together, coming to rest forehead to forehead. "I missed you," Athena signed in the small, private space between their bodies.

Sam's hands were full of her, so he mouthed the words back to her.

He'd lifted his head to do it, and Athena noticed the white bandage again. She set her hand lightly on it.

"I'm okay," he mouthed, still as unwilling to set her down as she was to be set. "I promise. Stitches come out in a couple days."

Athena nodded. Sam looked off to the side, toward the rest of their family—and then he set her down. "They're pulling Gun out," he signed.

He hooked his arm around her shoulders, and they stepped up to be with their family again.

Two paramedics brought the gurney down, and Leah climbed down after it. Gunner lay on it, almost flat. Athena couldn't tell if he was awake; she was too short to see around the people in front of her, or to see if anybody was talking. But the group shifted, parting so they could push Gunner to and through the wide automatic doors. Then the family fell in behind and walked into the hospital.

To her, it seemed almost like a funeral procession, and that freaked her out. She tugged on Sam's hand. When she had his attention she asked, "How is he?"

Sam smiled. "Considering everything, he's okay. He's Uncle Gun, just without the constant motion."

"Is he awake?"

“No. Aunt Leah just said he needed some pain meds. His upper back gets sore. His doctor in Nevada said he needs to build up his muscles more on top to ...” He paused for a second, then spelled out a long word. “C-O-M-P-E-N-S-A-T-E. I just realized I don’t know how to sign that word.”

Athena made the sign for *balance*, since that was pretty much a synonym for what he meant.

“Of course. Duh. I can’t remember the last time I didn’t know how to sign a word.”

He seemed freaked about that, so she assured him, “I don’t even know all the words in ASL, and I *teach* it. I don’t know all the words in English, either. I think that’s pretty normal for everybody but maybe linguists.”

Then she recalled what he’d just said and added, “The doctor told Uncle Gun he needed more muscles?” She couldn’t help but grin.

Sam grinned, too. “Yeah. It was a whole thing. He was *pissed*—and we’ve all been giving him shit about it since.”

“That makes me feel a lot better about him. That people are giving him shit like normal. It’s scary to see him tied to a gurney with a bunch of machines.”

“Yeah. He looked bad when I first saw him. And he has some shitty days. But he’s tough. He’ll be okay.” Sam looked around. “Hey, where’s Blanche?”

“I left her at home. I know she’s trained to be with me in crowds and chaos, but our training is still new, and the clubhouse has been a lot lately. I worry about her. Aunt Willa and Uncle Rad’s dogs don’t like her much. Besides, there are a zillion people around there to handle whatever I can’t hear.”

Sam nodded. “I get it.”

They were all in the waiting room now. Uncle Gun had been rolled through some big metal doors, and Aunt Leah, Aidan, and Larissa had gone with him.

As usual in a big group situation like this, Athena felt pretty lost. Several people—including both her parents—were

signing as they spoke, a habit she knew they'd developed for her, but it was the visual equivalent of white noise. As she understood that concept, at least. There wasn't enough context for her to make sense.

Sam understood and mainly kept his focus on her, but he couldn't help his attention getting pulled by things he heard around them. At least he tried to keep a play-by-play going for her. But she was beyond relieved when Mom headed toward them. She looked serious but calm as she stopped before them.

"It's going to take some time for Gun to get settled. We're starting to figure out who's staying here until he is, and who should head back to the clubhouse and get started on the party. Why don't you two do the Costco run? That way you can have some time alone and still be helping out. I know you've got some things to talk about."

"Dad, too?" Athena signed, hoping her mom understood her meaning.

"Yeah, Dad and I will talk, too. As soon as we get some time alone as well. Yeah?"

"Okay. Thanks. Who's got the list?"

"Sage, I think. I'll have her text it to you."

"Is something going wrong?" Sam asked, looking back and forth between Athena and her mom. "With you, I mean?" he asked Athena.

Mom rose onto her toes and kissed Sam's cheek. "You're a good boy, Sam. I'm glad about you two. We all are."

With that, she turned and walked away.

Sam frowned down at Athena. "Frosie? You okay?"

"Yeah. Of course. But yeah. There's stuff to talk about. Alone."

"Then let's get alone."

They took the van, headed to Costco to pick up supplies for what would be a reunion as well as a patch party for Monty and Sam. On the way, they stopped on a quiet street near the country club. Sam put the van in park and shifted to face Athena.

“What’s going on?” he asked, his expression bunched with worry.

Athena both did and did not want to tell him. She didn’t want the secret between them, and more than that, she wanted to feel the comfort she knew he’d offer. But he’d be angry, too, and he’d want to do something to Hunter.

She’d come around to the idea that her only avenue to satisfaction led through the club. Her father might know about it already, and she wanted Sam to be as involved as he wanted to be in whatever her father would do. She wanted to be involved as well.

But it was hard to say this thing. The rape, she’d never told anyone; both Sam and Mom had figured it out without her input. The pregnancy, so far, was the same. Sam would be the first she’d actually tell about any part of what Hunter did.

She wanted to tell him. But she didn’t want him to know.

It wasn’t shame. It *wasn’t*. It wasn’t panic, either. She didn’t blame herself for being raped, and she wasn’t panicked about the pregnancy. She didn’t have to panic, because she wouldn’t be pregnant very much longer. Her life would not change because of any of this.

Even so, it completely *sucked*. She hated that it had happened, she hated that she hadn’t been strong enough to stop it, and she *really* hated that she’d trusted that piece of shit and had given over so much of her life to him when Sam had been right there the whole time.

Most of all, she didn’t want Sam to see her differently now. Like she was fragile and helpless.

But that was stupid, and she knew it. Sam knew her better than anyone. He knew she was no wilting flower, despite her

size, despite her deafness.

So she shifted in her seat to face him, and she told him. “I’m pregnant.”

His color had improved dramatically in the time since he’d been shot, but it all drained out at once. “What?”

“That night—” The sentence she’d intended to make would have finished *Hunter didn’t use a condom*, but Sam had picked up on the implication and was already signing, so she let her hands drop.

“That *motherfucker*! My god, Athena. I know you don’t want me to—”

She caught his hand in motion and stopped him. When he gave her a quizzical look, she signed, “I talked to my mom, and I decided that nothing inside the law gives me what I need. Mom won’t work outside the law, so I want your help. The club’s help. Mom’s probably telling Dad right now.” Her father’s reaction would probably be so explosive, she wouldn’t be surprised if Sam heard it from here, miles away.

Sam sighed so heavily his shoulders slumped. “Good. I know you wanted to handle it, but what that fucker needs—”

Athena stopped him again. “I still want to be involved. I want what happens to be my choice. I would do it on my own, but I don’t know how, and I know I’m not physically strong enough. I need help.”

When she was finished, Sam picked up her hands and embraced them in his own. “Are you okay?”

She loved him so much. As much as ever, and something new as well. Not an improvement but an addition.

Reclaiming her hands, she answered him. “I am. Truly. I’m pissed, and I want him to pay, but I’m honestly not traumatized by any of this. Just furious.”

“You’re so damn tough, Frodo—I mean, *Frosie*.”

Grinning at the silly-cute nickname she already loved, Athena shrugged a little at his assertion of her toughness. She

thought she was pretty tough, too, but compliments made her feel weird, even from Sam.

“I assume you want an abortion?” he asked.

“Oh yeah. Totally. Soon as I can. That’s a little tricky now, since Oklahoma rolled backward fifty years.”

“More motherfuckers.”

“Agreed. But I did some research, and the Planned Parenthood in Overland Park is probably the closest place that does it.”

“Kansas?”

“Yep. There’s a page on their website about what to expect, and it looks like they want patients to stay close for a day or two. It means at least one overnight up there. Maybe two, depending on the time of my appointment.”

“Okay. Tell me what you need. I guess you want your mom to go—”

“I want you to be with me. If you’re okay with that.”

Despite the seriousness of their conversation, Sam smiled brightly at that. “Of *course* I’m okay with it. Thank *fuck* you want me there. Anything you need. Anything at all.” He made a frustrated gesture suddenly. “I hate how far away you are. Can I hold you?”

Athena wanted that as well, so she nodded and began to lean toward him. But Sam reached over and clasped her around the ribs. He lifted her, pulling her over to sit on his lap.

She settled in against his chest at once, and his perfect arms folded her up. When she felt his lips on her head, she also felt weeks of stress turning to dust and blowing away. She was so very glad she’d told him; this was the comfort she knew he’d offer.

Leaning back a bit, she met his eyes. “I love you, Samwise. So so so much.”

He pulled her even closer and kissed her.

~oOo~

Athena's parents were at the clubhouse when Sam and she returned with the supplies, and Dad was waiting. He grabbed her at once and pulled her into his little office.

She loved this cramped, windowless space; in her mind, no other place in the world was so purely her father's as this office. Two walls were filled, floor to ceiling and side to side, with grey metal shelving, and all those shelves were packed with tech: from wire crates of portable stuff to big blocks of electronics for the compound security system. His desk faced another wall, and above it hung a bank of monitors. His desk chair looked like he'd stolen it from the bridge of a spaceship.

On the back of the door was a star map, and leaning in one corner, in the space left between a wall and the side of a shelving unit, was the telescope he took on fun runs.

Her father, in every square inch.

Now, as soon as he closed the door, he spun around and grabbed her, pulling her into a crushing dad-hug. Athena swept her arms around his waist, grabbed the back of his kutte in her fists, and held on.

She'd thought she didn't want her father to know what had happened, but his knowing gave her this. She hadn't realized how alone she'd felt until the important people in her life all knew.

When she felt his lips on the top of her head, she was ready for the hug to end; Dad always ended his hugs that way. He set her back and peered deeply at her face.

"First thing: are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm okay, Dad. Really. I hate that he did it, and I want him to pay, but he didn't hurt me."

"Back when you and your mother were conspiring to keep this from me, you told me he got rough and you didn't like it, so you dumped him. That's a damn pretty package to wrap

rape up in, so tell me now exactly what happened. There was a mark on your neck, like a big hickey. Was that part of it?”

She nodded. “He bit me. But he didn’t really break the skin.”

“Didn’t *really*?”

Dad wasn’t an overly suspicious person, but he was deeply curious. At the moment, his curiosity was supercharged by some suspicion. He didn’t trust that she was telling him everything, because he knew she’d been keeping something important from him. “Just a little, Dad. Really, he didn’t hurt me. I’m telling the whole truth.”

“I’m going to kill him, starlight.”

“Don’t, Dad. Not that. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I don’t want something bad to happen to you because of this. Or anybody else I love. If you try to disappear him, people will look for him. Powerful people. Remember who his father is.”

“I know who Damon Cruz is. That changes not one damn thing. Nobody does this to my girl and lives. I’m telling you, Athena. I’m not negotiating with you.”

Athena stomped her foot. “Dad! It happened to me! You don’t get to take over like I don’t matter in what happens to the guy who raped me! Fuck that!”

Suddenly, her father’s expression shifted from determined anger to enjoyment. “You, little girl, are what my father would call a firecracker.”

“Don’t change the subject,” she insisted. “I know I can’t handle things by myself, but I *deserve* to be involved. And I don’t want him killed. I do want him hurt—bad enough that he never does it again. I want to be part of it.”

Instead of replying, Dad took her arm and led her to sit in his space-age captain’s chair. He crouched before her and gave her his ‘concerned father’ look. “I need you to understand something, Athena. If you want me safe, and Sam, because I assume he knows and wants to be part of it,” she nodded, and he went on, “then Hunter can’t be alive when we’re done. I

can arrange a death scene that shifts blame away from us. I am very good at that. It's much riskier to hurt somebody and leave them alive and able to communicate. Do you understand?"

Athena hadn't thought of that, but now she felt like a dope. Obviously, the only way to be sure Hunter didn't report who'd hurt him was if he wasn't around to tell. Also, he was known to be connected to the Bulls through her, and the Bulls were known to be violent. If he was badly hurt, even if he didn't tell, his father would look directly at the club first. That she *had* known; it was her whole rationale for wanting to keep the secret.

Which she had utterly failed at before she gave up trying.

When Dad saw that she'd processed his explanation, he added, "He dies, starlight. I will not let that motherfucker keep breathing. I don't want you involved in that. I want you safe, and I don't want it in your head to deal with for the rest of your life."

She grabbed his hands before he could continue. Then she signed, "Dad. This happened to me. Please don't push me to the sidelines. I know you want to protect me, but I need to be involved with this. What he did is in my head, and I'm furious. I'm so *mad*, Dad. I have to be part of the payback. Even if it's just watching."

He sighed heavily. "I don't want you to see me or Sam or anybody who helps do this thing. I've worked your whole life to keep this part of the club *away* from you."

"Do you really think any of us kids don't understand? The others overhear a lot, and they share it with everybody else. And we all see things, Dad. Every lockdown, every funeral, what do you think we all think? We know our family."

Dad looked away, studying the shelves of burner phones, walkie-talkies, bug zappers, and other gear. Again he sighed so big his chest swelled and his shoulders rose and dropped.

"We wanted you to have a normal childhood."

"Well, that was just plain dumb. You're a Bull and Mom's a PI. Where's the normal?" He laughed, and she grinned.

“Besides, normal is boring. I had a great childhood. And I love my family.” She leaned close. “Hunter took my choice away from me. Please don’t do that, too.”

“Okay. Let me think some things out, and talk to your mom, too. We need to handle this sooner than later, but tonight, we’ve got a party. This can wait another day or two. Agreed?”

“Yes, absolutely. One-hundred percent.”

He clasped her face between his meaty palms and kissed the tip of her nose. “I love you to the moon,” he signed when he let her go.

“And back,” she finished. Then she launched herself forward and hugged him as hard as she could.

~oOo~

Though the club had just been through more trouble, had had more losses, and Gunner would be in the hospital for quite a while longer, the party that night eventually rolled into the usual wild, rowdy scene. It was reunion and celebration of the end of that trouble, and it was also the celebration of two new patches: Sam and Monty.

Because most of their family was just now learning that they were a couple, and most of their family had been hoping for, or at least joking about, that for a long time, the party was also a sort of sideways celebration of Sam and Athena. For that reason, Sam got off light on the ‘get the newbie as wasted as possible without killing him’ ritual. Every time somebody called Sam and Monty over for a monster shot of something, somebody else made a joke about Sam needing his dick to get hard tonight.

Athena would have been spared from most of those gross jokes except that pretty much everybody remembered to sign while they spoke. At least until they were all too drunk to remember words at all.

If those jokes were the reason Sam wasn't pass-out drunk on the first night they could actually be together, Athena was willing to pay the price.

She paid careful attention to when the party shifted from an intentional celebration to the usual drunken chaos. Sam was definitely buzzed, but not so drunk he was no longer driving his brain or his body. Even at his patch party, Sam didn't get sloppy drunk. He was just loose and content.

Athena hated to be drunk, so she was fine.

He was leaning on the bar, talking with Jay, Duncan, Chris, and Monty. She came up and slipped her fingers between his.

"Hey, baby," he signed at once. "You good?"

"Yep, I'm good."

"Looks like little Athena's got some lovin' on her mind," Jay signed, because he was a butt like that.

She put on a spicy grin and flipped him off, because he deserved it. Everybody, including Jay, laughed big.

"Back off, asshole," Sam signed. He was smiling, but Athena saw an edge to it. He looked down at her. "Do you need me?"

"That's what I'm sayin'," Jay signed.

Sam whipped around and apparently gave him a warning look, because Jay made the sign for "I'm backing away slowly." Looking at Athena, he signed, "Sorry, Athena."

"You're a butt, but I love you anyway," she told him. Then she turned to Sam and signed, "Please come with me."

He came, and she led him toward the stairs. The confederation of dunces behind them had more to say about that, apparently, because Sam whipped around and sent up an emphatic double bird, but Athena had the luxury of ignoring them completely.

Sam stopped her as she put her foot on the first step.

"Hey. Is that what you want? You don't want to wait until after ..." He gestured subtly at her midsection, and she figured

out the rest of his sentence—he'd signed with his back to the room, so nobody else could see.

She did the same. "I don't want to wait, no. The thing inside me is microscopic, and it doesn't hurt. But we don't have to use anything, and as far as I can see that's the one good thing about the whole shitty affair. Yeah, unless you're too drunk, I want to go upstairs and find a bed. Now."

Sam grinned. "I am absolutely not too drunk. Let's go."

He set his hand on her back, and they hurried up the stairs and to the first crash pad with an open door. As Sam closed and locked the door behind them, he turned, cast a glance at the basic double bed, and asked, "Are you sure you want to do it here? These beds have seen some shit."

Athena laughed and stepped up to stand right in front of him. She smiled up at his handsome face, his beautiful eyes. "I know. I also know that the bedding gets washed after. This is fine. Besides, it *is* your patch party. You can't leave early, and I don't want to wait any longer."

Her eyes slid to the side of his neck and the white strip of gauze and tape there. *He got shot!* her brain yelled suddenly, and she almost shuddered. Only a few days after they'd figured out what they wanted to be together, he'd almost *died*.

She pushed that awful thought away, but it left a faint trail of doubt behind, so she asked, "Unless ... do you need to wait, because you still have stitches?"

Her question made him raise his hand and brush his fingers over the bandage. "It's okay. It's basically healed. The stitches come out in a couple days. If you want, I'll run down and ask Aunt Willa to take them out now."

"No, don't do that. Leave them in until the doctor says. But if you don't think it'll hurt you ..."

"At this point, Frosie, the real pain would be waiting any longer."

She grinned and grabbed the plackets of his kutte. Rising onto her toes, she tipped her face up and offered her mouth. It was the only way she could initiate a kiss when they were both

standing; Sam was more than a foot taller than she was, so he had to meet her halfway.

He did, wearing a sweet, gentle smile as he bent toward her and covered her mouth with his own.

Still they'd shared only a few kisses, and still she marveled at the power of their *rightness*. Each one made her whole body relax, even as desire flamed and flowed through her. Lifting her arms to loop over his neck, she tried to get even closer.

He chuckled against her mouth and backed off half an inch, just enough that when she opened her eyes, she saw him watching. Unwilling to release him, she couldn't sign to ask why he'd stopped, so she simply tilted her head and frowned a little, asking that way.

His smile widened, and he brought a hand up between them and signed, "You make the *sexiest* little noise when we kiss. It's like a purr, and it makes me crazy."

Normally being told she'd made a noise freaked her out; she did *not* like the idea of her body doing something she wasn't aware of. But some sounds were truly out of her control—apparently like this one. Athena understood the idea of *purr* fairly well, she thought. She could feel Minnie purring when they were curled up together. It was a good feeling, for Minnie and for her, so it was probably a good sound, too.

Besides, the look in Sam's eyes, and the way he'd described the sound she made, conveyed clearly that it wasn't something gross or otherwise embarrassing. So she smiled and eliminated the sliver of distance between them, kissing him again.

This time, Sam lifted her up as they kissed and walked her to the bed. He laid her down and followed to lie on his hip at her side.

For a moment, they lay together, gazing into each other's eyes. Sam's hand rested on her belly, over her top. Her hands had slipped from around his neck and now rested on his chest.

This was where they would cross into new territory. She knew he was thinking the same thing.

He lifted his hand from her belly and asked, “Is it weird for you?”

She considered her answer for a second and told him the truth. “A little, maybe. Scary, though, not weird. It feels like the point of no return. I never want anything to happen that pulls us apart.”

“Me either. But to me, we already crossed the point of no return. Maybe because I was the first to figure out how I feel? I never want anything to pull us apart, either, and if you change your mind, or your feelings change down the road, I will work out how to be buds again, but I don’t see my feelings ever changing. I am in *love* with you, Athena.”

“I’m in love with you, too.”

He smiled and brushed some stray hairs from her face. “Then it’s not weird.”

“Nope. Not scary, either.”

His fingers traced over the faint remnants of the bruise on her neck. “I will never hurt you.”

“I know. You never have.” She brushed the bandage on his neck. “I will never hurt you, either.”

“I know. You never have,” he mirrored. With that, he leaned down and kissed her again, and this time when his hand went to her belly, he pushed it under her top. She felt the warm rough of his fingers on her bare skin, and all her muscles there spasmed. As his mouth moved over hers, as his tongue explored, his hand skimmed higher, to her breast, where it rested for a moment over the lace and silk of her bra.

Athena couldn’t help but arch up to press her breast more tightly to him, and when she did, Sam broke their kiss, resting his cheek on hers as his breath stuttered over her ear and ruffled her hair. She felt his lips moving against her face and wondered what he was saying.

Then he rose up and gazed down at her, his expression intense and serious. *I want to take your clothes off*, he said, or at least mouthed. Athena wanted that, too, so she nodded.

She helped him get her top up and over her head, and as he tossed it away, she reached awkwardly behind her and unhooked her bra. When it was free, Sam tossed that away as well. Then Athena pushed at his kutte, dragging it off his shoulders until he took over and got it the rest of the way off.

That, he didn't toss carelessly away. He reached to set it on the small, cheap dresser that served as a nightstand as well. As he did, Athena worked the buttons of his flannel shirt.

Finally, they were both topless and a little breathless from the contortions of undressing, and Athena registered that they were topless together. More than that, they were chest to chest, her bare breasts pressed to his bare pecs.

In one way, it wasn't so unusual. She'd seen him in swim trunks plenty of times; very little of Sam's body was unknown to her. And she preferred two-piece suits, so he was pretty familiar with her body as well. When they were really little, they used to run around naked all the time, and bathe together regularly. Though neither of them remembered those times, there was ample photographic and video evidence—much to their mutual chagrin.

But in another way, the most important way, this was stunningly new. Athena's experience of Sam's body in this moment was completely unfamiliar to her—as was her experience of her own body with him. She literally throbbed with need. Her breasts ached, her joints were liquid and restless. She could feel the heft of him inside his jeans, pressing at the point that she throbbed.

“Sam,” she signed, wanting to tell him how stuffed full of love and need and ... just ... *him* she already felt, but she couldn't think of the way to form the thought so it contained everything she felt.

“I know,” he signed, and she knew it was true. He felt the same. No words required.

He scooted down a few inches, and she knew he meant to put his mouth on her breasts. Wanting that so much, Athena arched up sharply, offering herself—but where he put his

mouth first was not her nipple, but a point between and below her breasts, at the nexus of her ribcage.

She had a scar there from a surgery to repair a congenital defect in her diaphragm when she was an infant. She had several scars on her abdomen and back, mementos of five surgeries before she was five, to repair defects she'd been born with or had developed shortly after birth, as her tiny, undercooked body had tried to finish cooking outside the oven.

Sam was kissing all the scars on her belly. More than kissing them—he was loving them, taking his time, tracing his tongue over each one, kissing his way to the next. Every touch was adoration, every touch was devotion, every touch was both promise and reminder. Sam knew her. He knew those scars, what they meant, and how she felt about them.

Sam knew her. Inside and out.

When he finally took a nipple into his mouth and sucked, Athena was nearly undone right then.

Her experience with men was quite limited. Some light making out with three boys during high school. A brief stretch of dating an ASL interpreter she'd met at a 'disability resource fair,' with whom she'd never progressed beyond some light making out before he'd taken a job in Washington D.C. And Hunter. Hunter was the only man she'd seen naked in person (discounting the many times over the years she'd seen far more of her uncles, right here in the clubhouse, than she wanted to remember), and he was the only non-medical man who'd ever seen her naked.

Until tonight. Athena was desperate to be naked with Sam now. Not only because she wanted to feel all of his long, strong, wonderful self all over her, but because she wanted to be able to supplant Hunter in her experience of sex. She wanted Sam to be the one she thought of when she remembered having sex. She wanted memories she wanted to remember. And she didn't want to wait another second to have them.

When she tried to grab at his belt, struggling to reach it while he suckled her breast, Sam caught the scent of her urgency; he released her breast and rose enough to meet her eyes.

“I want you,” she told him. “I need you now.”

He shook his head. “I want to take my time. This is our first time, I want to savor.”

“Savor later. I want you now. I need you inside me.” *To erase Hunter*, she thought, but she left those words in her head.

With a smile, he relented. Again they performed a series of awkward contortions in which they ‘helped’ each other shed the rest of their clothes, eventually giving up to handle their own. Was getting naked ever truly sexy, or was that only in books and movies?

This *was* pretty fucking sexy, actually. What it wasn’t was graceful. Graceful was the thing for books and movies.

They were finally totally naked together, and Athena moved her legs around, delighting in the brush of the hair on his over her smooth skin. God, he was so big. She always felt like a hobbit; she was in single-digit percentiles for adult height, and Sam was tall. It wasn’t like she was surprised he was big. And yet, his big, hot, naked body felt entirely new now.

The part of him digging into her belly, twice as hot and hard as the rest of him, was not small either. Sheesh. What if she wasn’t big enough to take him?

“Okay?” he asked.

Her momentary worry must have shown on her face. She replaced it with a smile and a nod. “I’m perfect. Except we’re too far apart.”

His chuckle shook her body. Then he shifted over her, settling himself between her legs. Rocking to one side and then the other, he pulled her thighs up to his hips, urging her to keep them there. She did, and tried to wrap around him, but when she crossed her ankles, the stretch in her thighs was too

much. Kind of the way she couldn't hold hands with linked fingers for very long for more reason than her need to keep her hands free; his hands were so much bigger than hers that that hold stretched her fingers uncomfortably.

Athena stopped thinking as Sam's hand slipped between her legs and brushed over her mound. Sparks flew through her as if a log had been kicked over in the fire building inside her. When his fingers slipped into her slit and found her clit, the sensation was an explosion, and she bucked and writhed beneath him.

A vibration went through his chest, and Athena thought, *he's purring*. Maybe she was as well; all she knew for sure was she'd never felt like this. Already an orgasm was hurrying toward her, but this was more than physical pleasure. This was ... more than she even understood, but it was right, that she knew.

When he shifted again, coming to rest directly above her, balanced on both his forearms, and she felt the press of him at her core, Athena opened her eyes. Sam had gone still, and he watched her. Waiting for her to tell him again, at this point of no return, that she was ready. That she wanted this.

That was new, too, this feeling of being the one in charge, even as she lay beneath him. Knowing for sure that he would stop when she said stop, that he would never do anything she didn't want, never try to 'persuade' her to change her mind. That he would respect her. Always. Forever.

Slipping her hand between them, reaching his cock, she took hold—and felt Sam flinch deeply as his eyes fluttered closed. Together, they led him into her.

He moved slowly, entering her by fractions. His slide was smooth, but Athena felt the stretch of her body making room. Any burn she might have felt was soothed by the exquisite pleasure of his body filling hers, finding every most sensitive, most needy place inside her.

When he reached her limit and stopped, she knew there was more of him she didn't have room for—but Sam didn't

seem to mind that. His eyes were squeezed shut, and tendons rose beneath his jaw.

When he began to rock, to build a rhythm, Athena was already so close she thought something inside her might literally burst. Just as a half-sane thought to do something to distract herself a little before she went over into Orgasmland began to form, however, Sam did something new, like a twist just at the point his thrust went deepest. Whatever it was, it turbocharged every single nerve and cell in Athena's body, and her climax ran her over like a locomotive.

She'd never felt anything like it. As if she were being hollowed out and filled back up with something new, all while she floated and rolled through a star-filled sky. Her skin felt half its normal size, and twice its normal temperature. It was pain and pleasure and release and tension, and god, so incredibly, entirely *perfect*.

While her orgasm had her in its clutches, Sam's pace slowed but didn't stop, keeping her going even longer, then bringing her home gently. When she opened her eyes, his face was flushed and sweaty, his expression a little desperate. Understanding that he'd denied himself until she was done, that he loved her that much, she rocked her hips up to counter his next thrust. When she felt a groan or a grunt in his chest, she did it again, quickening their rhythm until he couldn't hold out any longer. His hips rocked faster, harder, and Athena felt the stirrings of a second orgasm just as he thrust deep and went rigid, frozen except for a series of tremors through his middle.

As he finally relaxed, he gaped at her, obviously as stunned as she was. Then he dropped his head to hers and kissed her more deeply, more emphatically, than he ever yet had. Like he wanted to fuse them together just like this.

Athena threw her arms around him and joined the effort.

No question they had crossed the point of no return. Nothing would ever be the same between them again.

She meant never to look back.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sam woke to the sounds of Athena having a nightmare.

They'd slept in the same room many times, so he recognized the nightmare she was having: the one where she didn't have hands. Always her arms came up, hands dangling, and she made a ghostly kind of whimper as if she was seeing only wrists at the ends of her arms.

Even the way she whimpered was different from the sound most people made. People who didn't know any Deaf people well probably had no idea how much even sounds considered autonomic were shaped by the needs of communication. Whimpers and grunts, even coughs and sneezes, had an element of language about them; hearing people in community, like those sharing vocal language, made similar sounds. The few sounds Athena made were totally different.

Though they'd slept in the same room frequently, even as adults, and they'd fallen asleep on various sofas or the floors of various rooms often enough, it had been years since they'd slept in a bed together—and they'd maybe never slept wrapped up together in this way, even as little kids.

He had eased this nightmare from her several times. But now she was already in his arms.

He rolled to his side and held her firmly against him. She was so small, he felt like he could fold his whole body around hers.

She struggled at first, still caught in the dream. Thinking of what Hunter had done, he eased up a little, letting her know through the veil of her sleep that she wasn't trapped, only protected. She settled quickly, her breaths slowing, her face nuzzling against his neck. She was on the wounded side, and his stitches pulled a bit as she nuzzled, but he didn't care.

Just as he thought she was through the nightmare and back down into restful sleep, he felt her hand slip up his chest, over his jaw, into his hair, where her fingers began to stroke. That

sensation was pure serotonin for Sam, and a soft, rolling groan left his body.

Athena leaned back and looked up at him. The room was dim but not fully dark; the lights were still on in the hallway, and the glow around the door, as well as the street lights through the partially open blinds in the window, provided light to see well enough.

When she saw him looking, she smiled and signed, “When we’re close like this, I can feel the sounds you make in your chest. The vibrations. I don’t think I ever noticed that before.”

“We’ve never been this close before,” he pointed out, feeling completely content. He kissed her forehead. “You were having the nightmare.”

She shrugged in his arms. “It’s already fading. No big.”

“That’s your anxiety dream. Are you anxious?”

“Not about you, or this. At all. This is perfect. But I’ve been having it a lot lately.”

She didn’t continue her explanation, but she didn’t need to. “Since Hunter?”

“I guess, but I’m not anxious about that. Just really, really pissed.”

Every time they talked about what Hunter had done, Athena shoved aside any suggestion that she’d been hurt by it more than the bite on her neck. She was not traumatized, she insisted. She was angry. Furious. Full of rage. And every time, Sam had the same thought: anger was an expression of trauma, too. It wasn’t all tears and cowering in corners. People felt and expressed trauma all kinds of ways, and growing up in this family, Athena should know that. The Bulls were pretty much a case study for the full range of ways to process trauma.

Fuck, Uncle Gun’s primary expression of trauma was extremely inappropriate humor. Somebody like Athena, who scarcely allowed herself a tear and was fully devoted to proving herself to be tough, to be fierce? Of *course* fury would be her way.

He said none of that to her, however. It was important to her not to be traumatized, and it was all too fresh to try to push her on that point. Fresh? Fuck, it was still happening. Until she had the abortion and was recovered from it, it would still be happening.

“Can we make a pact?” Athena asked.

“Sure. About what?”

“When we’re together like this, we never, ever mention Hunter or any other person we were with. When we’re like this, it’s just us. Always.”

“That’s a good pact. Should we seal it with a kiss?”

Her eyes twinkled in the soft light as she grinned. “And maybe more?”

“Are you hitting on me, Frosie?” Never before had being with a woman seemed so easy, so comfortable. So simply right.

He felt her hand slip under the covers, glide down his chest, his belly, and wrap around his cock. He’d been hard since she’d snuggled close against him, since even before that. The feel of her small, soft hand easing over his shaft sent hot bolts of need straight through his gut.

Athena shifted beneath him, enough to convey what she wanted. Grinning, Sam rolled to his back and gave it to her.

At once, she straddled him and sat up—and holy *shit!* The light from the window slanted across her head and chest, and it finally really hit him. This was Athena. His Athena. His in every way. Never again anyone else’s. She was his, and he was hers. As they’d always been. And so much more.

Jesus, she was beautiful. Her thick, long, dark hair, mussed from sleep and from what they’d done before sleep, spread over her shoulders like a cape of shadow. Her small breasts were round and firm, the nipples tight brown dots. The neatly tended puff of dark hair at the join of her legs hadn’t surprised him last night; Athena was far too invested in not looking like a little girl to shave there.

Her body was slim but sleekly muscled; she worked hard to be stronger than she looked. A few scars, surgically straight or little more than a dot, scattered over her torso. More evidence of her toughness. She'd been beating odds since before she was born.

"I love you," he told her. Three words shared so many times in their lives, but only now meaning everything.

She smiled. "I love you."

When he returned his hands to her hips and began to lift her, she rose onto her knees and took hold of his cock again. The sensation of her hand around him while her pussy slipped over him just about turned Sam into an incoherent mass of nerve endings. He groaned—and then opened his eyes to see her bright, happy grin. She'd felt that, too.

As soon as she began to rock and grind on top of him, Sam knew he wouldn't be able to last in this position the way he'd managed last night. It was like the nerves in his eyeballs had developed connections directly to his cock. The sight of her was almost too much to bear.

Needing to touch her, and also to speed up her own pleasure, Sam put his hands on her tits. When he brushed his thumbs over the nubs of her nipples, she arched, pressing herself into his hands. When he closed thumb and forefinger over each one, her pussy clamped around him so hard his vision went dim.

For a moment, he almost felt frustrated; he wanted so badly to talk to her, to tell her how she made him feel, what she was doing to him, how much he loved it, loved her, but he didn't want to take his hands away from her, and her eyes were closed, anyway. But then he realized that he could convey everything to her, in the ways he always had. Communication was more than words, no matter how those words were shared.

Sam sat up and clasped her face in his hands. Surprise stopped her, and she opened her eyes wide, asking. He answered by kissing her like he'd never kissed anyone before. More deeply, more passionately. Trying to tell her *everything*.

In the way she kissed him back, he knew she understood.

Mere seconds later, Athena began to make the same, tiny, unfocused grunts she'd made last night, signaling the cresting wave of her orgasm. Sam dropped one hand from her face and slipped it between her legs, reveling in the sleek slip of his fingers over her clit. God, she was so wet. For him. For *them*.

As she came, she threw her arms around him, grinding on him with her entire body, burying her face against his neck—the good side, this time—and those strange, beautiful grunts rolled from her until she went still and silent, her every muscle quivering inside her motionless body.

He felt each rolling throb of her pussy, and it drove him straight off the cliff. While she was still clenched around him, Sam rocked his hips up, soaring as deeply into her as he could get, and exploded. He came so hard he saw stars.

When it was over, they stayed exactly as they were, sitting up in bed, wound together like a sweaty braid. Sam felt sated. Filled all the way to the top. Complete.

After a long spell of stillness, he realized that Athena had fallen asleep. Just as they were. Still connected, still as tightly entwined as it was possible to be.

He lay back and left her exactly where she was. Eventually he joined her in dreamless sleep.

~oOo~

When Sam next woke, a pale wash of fresh morning light brightened the room. Athena had rolled off him and lay in a curl at his side, her head tucked against his ribs and her hands folded under her chin. He had just long enough to smile at the sweet peace of it before the door swung open, and that peace broke.

Athena's father stood in the doorway, and he did not look amused.

Sam had locked that door! But then he remembered that Athena had gone to the bathroom after their first time. She must not have locked the door on her return.

Sam's first impulse was to yank on the disordered covers and make sure Athena's naked body was under them—and then that his own private parts were concealed as well.

“We need to talk,” Apollo said, his voice brusque. “My office. Now. Don't wake her.” He stepped back and closed the door.

Sam lay there, his heart pounding, and tried to understand what had just happened. Apollo knew he and Athena were together. He knew neither of them was a virgin, and he now knew about what Hunter had done.

Maybe that was why he was pissed—did he think Sam had pushed Athena to have sex after being raped? Did he think, as Sam initially had, that she wouldn't have wanted it herself?

If that was true, then the real question was would Apollo give Sam a chance to explain before he gutted him like a trout?

Every second he delayed would probably make Apollo think Sam felt guilty, which would make him less inclined to hear an explanation before the gutting occurred. Moving carefully, arranging each shift of his body so it didn't disturb Athena, he eased from the bed and rearranged his pillow so she was curled against that instead. She squirmed a little but didn't wake.

Of course, now there was a new problem: the morning after their first night together—first *sexual* night, anyway—Athena would wake up alone.

Yeah, that was not cool. He needed to leave a note or something. He didn't keep a pen or paper on him because he used his phone for shit like that—well, he could text her.

Her phone was on the dresser beside his. Pulling his kutte over it to obscure the bright flash of light it made in lieu of an audible alert, he grabbed his phone and texted: *Downstairs with your dad. He came up and wanted to talk STAT.* He added

the appropriate “holy shit!” face emoji and almost called it good—but then he added *Last night was perfect. I love you.*

Hopefully that wasn't the last time he'd be able to say that to her.

~oOo~

Apollo's office was seriously weird. It was a small, windowless box, a former pantry, maybe, or a walk-in closet, or maybe just a room built out as an afterthought. At first glance, it looked like a rat's nest, with most of the space taken up by full walls of industrial shelves, packed top to bottom with tech gear, and the parts for the gear, coils of cables of different sizes and uses, crates of batteries, and so on. But it was all organized with a truly insane degree of specificity.

Apollo's desk took up the rest of the space. The desk itself was an average metal thing, probably a hand-me-down from somewhere, but his chair was a custom job. It most resembled the gaming chairs Sam and Mason had gotten for Christmas one year when they were kids, but this was bigger, on rollers like a desk chair, and upholstered in orange leather with white accents and black trim.

Above the desk was a bank of monitors, showing the station, the bike lot, the alley, the various exterior doors. Sam knew Apollo could toggle to show the goings-on in most of the rooms inside the clubhouse and the station, too. Only the crash pads and the chapel were without cameras. He also knew that Apollo had the whole system rigged so the main recordings wiped every twelve hours, but those twelve hours of footage got sent untraceably to a secure server offsite.

He'd always been a little intimidated by the things Apollo and Jazz could do with tech. His own skill was good enough to set up a pretty rad gaming system in his room, and solve the usual home tech issues, but he was completely baffled by a lot of the club's tech shit. And impressed as fuck.

There was no other chair in the room, so Sam stood awkwardly beside the desk while Apollo glared up at him.

“I can explain,” he said when Apollo didn’t immediately lunge at him with murder in his eyes. “I promise I didn’t—” He cut off when Apollo’s hand shot up.

Then Athena’s father smiled. It was a small thing, jockeying for space with obvious anger, and Sam didn’t know what to make of it.

“You’re not in trouble, Sam.”

“I’m not?” he asked stupidly.

Apollo cocked his head. “Should you be?”

“No. No, sorry. I just ... I want you to know that I didn’t do anything Athena didn’t want last night. I know she ... I thought she’d want to wait after ... what happened, but she didn’t. I promise I didn’t push.”

“I believe you. I won’t say I loved seeing my little girl like that, but if I had to, seeing her with you is the only way it’s bearable.” His smile deepened to something more comfortable. “She looked like she felt safe.”

“She’s always safe with me.”

“I know.”

“Okay ... then ... why do you want to talk? I don’t want to sound impatient, but last night was our first time, and I left her alone upstairs, so ...”

“You didn’t think to leave a fuckin’ note?” Athena’s father signed as well as spoke. He managed to convey twice the irritation, communicating in two ways simultaneously.

“I did, I sent her a text. But that’s not the same.”

After a moment’s study of him, Apollo said, “You’re a good man, Sam.”

Stress left Sam’s spine with such speed he thought he’d fall over.

As if he realized it, Apollo leaned over, dragged a folded metal chair out from between two shelving units, and popped it open. “Have a seat. We’ll be quick as we can.”

Sam sat. And then the door swung open and banged against the back of the chair hard enough to shock the shit out of him. He whipped around and found Athena standing there, dressed but her hair still in its sex-and-sleep tousle.

“You stole my boyfriend!” she told her father, her hands flying so that they clapped each time they came together. Angry as she was, Sam felt a zing of serotonin at the word *boyfriend*. “Don’t pull any alpha bullshit, Dad,” Athena continued, still whipping her hands around. “I’m a grownup.”

“Calm down—” Apollo started. Athena cut him off with a stomp of her foot.

“Don’t tell me to calm down!”

Sam was within reach of her, so he caught and held her hand for a moment. Athena didn’t like her hands held, especially not when she was upset, so he let go as soon as he had her attention. “It’s okay. I’m not here to get in trouble.”

“Then what?” she asked as anger began to cede ground to confusion.

Sam still didn’t know the answer to that question, so he looked to Apollo.

Apollo sighed heavily. “There’s only one chair.”

Athena immediately plopped onto Sam’s lap and crossed her arms. Sam could see only part of her profile, but he knew that set of her jaw, and he almost laughed. This microscopic woman was utterly immovable in this mood.

Her father knew it as well as Sam did, and he didn’t try to fight it. “I wanted to talk to Sam about dealing with Hunter.”

“And you didn’t want me to be part of it? Dad, we talked about this!”

“I planned to tell you—but I did *not* agree to let you be involved. You insisting is not the end of the matter, Athena. It’s my call.”

Athena's reaction was swift and violent. She balled her fists and slammed them on the corner of the desk. "NO!" she signed. "It's MY call! I'm the one he raped!"

The word 'rape' hit Apollo with obvious force. Anger fully reclaimed his expression, even as he spoke to his daughter. "And I'm your father! I am not putting you at any more risk! If this goes wrong—and you don't know half the ways it might—I want you far, far away from it."

Athena shook her head. "Then no. Don't do anything, if you're going to ice me out. Leave him alone."

"Absolutely not. That piece of shit hurt my *child*. He doesn't keep breathing after that."

Athena whipped around and stared at Sam, her eyes wide and fierce. She wanted him to take a side, and it was extremely clear what side he needed to be on, should he wish things between them to continue harmoniously.

But he was on her father's side. He understood why Athena was so insistent, why she felt so passionately that this was her justice to take. He agreed on that point. He saw that his impulse to go after Hunter the second he'd known what he'd done was the same as Apollo's impulse now—righteous and yet still wrong. It took agency from Athena, and maybe that was the greatest offense of rape, the way it took power from the victim. He understood all that, but he still didn't want Athena anywhere near the scene where Hunter met his consequences.

Actually, that should be her choice, too, shouldn't it? She wasn't a child.

Knowing full well he was about to piss off an already very angry father, Sam told him, "It's not about us. Athena should decide."

The way Apollo looked at him, Sam hoped the beatdown he was so clearly going to get didn't open up his neck again. But Athena threw her arms around that neck and hung on, offering him full-body gratitude. The beatdown would be worth it.

Athena's reaction seemed to cool her father a degree or two. He considered them quietly for a long moment before he sighed again, reached over, and tapped her leg. When he had her attention, he signed, "Your mother is going to kill me. You understand? She will peel me like a fucking grape."

Sam could actually feel the tension leave Athena's body.

"Mom will understand. I will make sure she does. And thank you, Dad."

"You understand that I intend to kill this fucker, right? And I mean to make him hurt first. Do you really want to be there for that?"

That she took some time to consider the question surprised Sam. When Athena made up her mind about something, she pretty much locked that door and melted the key down for scrap.

"I told you that I don't want him killed," she began. "I want him to hurt. But I understand why you say you can't hurt him and let him live. I wish it could be different, but ... it's burning me up from the inside that he's just walking around without any damage except a lost job. The stuff Mom can do doesn't help. I thought she could fuck him up that way, but it's all ... *paperwork*. It isn't enough."

She paused. Both Sam and Apollo let the pause go until Athena was ready to fill it. They understood that she was working herself toward an answer she needed to find on her own.

"It makes me crazy that he doesn't even think he raped me. He thinks because he was my boyfriend, he was *entitled* to do what he did."

"What?" Apollo cut in. "He said that?"

Athena nodded. Her father started to sign something more, but he dropped his hands and shook his head. Sam noticed that the tendons in his neck had gone taut.

When Athena didn't pick up her thread, Apollo eventually asked, "Has he reached out to you since that night?"

“I told him I wouldn’t tell the club unless he tried to contact me. I think he believed that, and I know he’s afraid of you. But then I blocked all his contacts, so I don’t know for sure if he ever tried. I didn’t tell anybody, by the way. Even to him, I didn’t lie. You guys all just figured it out because I apparently suck as a liar.”

“That’s not a character flaw, starlight,” her father assured her. Then he asked, “You blocked all his contacts? Social media, too?”

When she nodded, Apollo spun his fancy chair and faced his main computer. He went online, googled Hunter’s name, didn’t like his results there, typed something else and pulled up a different hit list that looked a lot like Google but was not. There, he found hits for various social media sites. The first hit was TikTok.

Sam had never followed that asswipe on any social media. They’d never tried to be friends. But Athena had told him that Hunter had a healthy TikTok following, where he did videos about Deaf culture and ASL.

Athena rapped on the desk to get her father’s attention. When she had it, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“I want to see if he talks about you, or anything else relevant. I want to know what he’s been doing for the past few weeks.”

Hunter posted a lot, at least once a day most days. They sat there for a good twenty minutes, starting each video, watching long enough to understand the topic, then moving on to the next.

Two days after the party at the lake, Hunter posted one with the caption, ‘It’s hard to be a nice guy when women are the way they are.’

They all exchanged a glance before Apollo started that one.

The video was simply Hunter, in his usual position, showing himself from the chest up, obviously sitting at his kitchen table. While most of his videos showed him smiling,

looking like the pretty-boy thirst trap the people of TikTok had declared him to be, in this one, he was somber.

I broke up with my girlfriend recently, Hunter signed, looking appropriately downbeat about it. Captions played across the top of the screen. *It was a bad breakup. I tried to be gentle about it. I didn't want to hurt her; I just needed to move on. But she went crazy, physically attacking me, making wild accusations. I knew there was no way reason would win out, so I left. My friends say I dodged a bullet. Since then I've been thinking a lot about the ways our society has built up women so they think they are the only ones who get to decide what we can do, what we can say, even what things are. The truth doesn't matter, only what women say is true. They talk about gaslighting and mansplaining constantly, but it's all projection. They're the ones warping reality to suit whatever their agenda is.*

Apollo stopped it there and turned to them again. Athena had become so tense Sam thought she might levitate off his lap.

“That sounds like a heap of incel shit,” Sam said and signed.

As far as he knew, Hunter didn't spew that shit normally. And he couldn't believe Athena would have tolerated it, even if Hunter had been the only decent-looking ASL-fluent man in the entire state of Oklahoma.

Apollo nodded at Sam's observation. “That's what it sounds like. Is that normal for him?” he asked Athena. The expression on his face and disbelief in his voice indicated that he couldn't believe either that Athena would have given a guy like that even a moment of her life.

Athena didn't answer. She was still staring at the screen, where Hunter's face was frozen in that serious, downbeat expression, and his hands were in the middle of the sign for ‘agenda.’

Sam realized she was shaking. It was subtle, but the tremor ran through her whole body. When he brushed his hand down her arm, meaning to offer comfort, she flinched.

The flinch seemed to snap her back into the moment. She looked at Sam, then at her father, then at the screen.

“I’m good with you killing him,” she signed. “Before you do, I want to cut off his dick. Personally. I mean that sincerely.”

If her father was shocked by her vehemence, he didn’t show it.

“This video complicates things, starlight,” Apollo told her. He turned back to the screen and scrolled down. “It’s got fifty thousand likes, and more than two thousand comments.” He scrolled through the comments. “The top comments are mostly women telling him off, but there is a very strong faction of assholes agreeing with him. That’s not important right now. What’s important is how many people know about this video. I can scrub his social media, but this thing got shared thousands of times, in duets and stitches and ... I can’t do anything about those. It’s a link to you, with an accusation that you got violent. We’re already dealing with the need for finesse because of his father’s link to the mayor. That limits our usual ways of keeping work like this under the radar. His social media presence limits us more.”

“Are you saying he gets away with it?” Sam asked because Athena was starting to lose the plot. She’d wrapped her arms around herself and was rocking on his lap.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Apollo said. He leaned over and pulled one of Athena’s arms free so he could take her hand gently, resting it on his palm. With his free hand he told her, “It means it has to look like absolutely nothing more than an accident. He has to die with his parts, Athena. We can hurt him first, but only in ways consistent with the accident we set up.”

That brought Athena enough calm to focus again. “What kind of accident?”

“Car accident is easiest.” He let her go and turned back to his screen. After a few keystrokes, he called up what looked like a GPS map. “He’s at home now. Does he go anywhere routinely that takes him off the beaten path?”

With a clap of her hands, she got her father's eyes on her again. "When did you start tracking him?"

Her father actually grinned. "Uh ... right before your first date."

"Dad! Gross! Are you still tracking *me*?"

"I track everyone, Athena. I don't *look* unless I need to—which is why I don't know his habits already. Don't start a fight about it. Until I am dead, I am going to know exactly where you are anytime I need to."

"Awesome. I have a creepy stalker for a father, to go with my disgusting rapist ex-boyfriend."

"Don't, Athena," Apollo rejoined, his expression serious again—and hurt as well. "I do this to try to make sure you're *safe*. And I asked a question. Does he go anywhere that isn't full of eyes?"

She thought about that for a second. "His grandfather lives in a retirement home outside of OKC. He goes to have dinner with him every other Thursday. It's super rural. It's near the river, too."

Apollo smiled again. "That's perfect. A long drive over country roads. Do you know when his next visit will be?"

Again Athena took a beat to think. "I think it's this Thursday." She drew her phone from her jeans pocket and opened her calendar. Sam watched her scroll back a month, then forward again. "Yeah, this Thursday."

A few days from now.

Leaning back in his chair, Apollo nodded. "Okay. It looks like we have the beginnings of a plan."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mom put her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes, dragging her fingers harshly across her lids. For as long as Athena could remember, that was a sign that her mother was at the end of her patience, and Athena was about to get in trouble.

Athena was twenty-two years old and beyond getting grounded or having something taken away, but she still felt the little pulse of guilt and worry. She tried to ignore it.

“I have to do this, Mom.”

“I understand why you think that, but it’s a mistake. For more reasons than the immediate risk it puts you in.”

“What does that mean?”

It was Thursday evening, and Athena and her mother had been arguing for almost half an hour. What Sam and she had been calling Operation Hunter Hunt for the past few days was in motion. Dad, Dex, and Uncle Simon were already on their way west, meaning to get hold of Hunter after he left the nursing home. Sam and Jay were coming to pick Athena up, and they would meet the others at the place where the club did stuff like this.

Athena would be lying if she suggested she wasn’t conflicted about all this, and feeling nauseated for reasons that had nothing to do with the blob of goo temporarily in her uterus. Even after that nasty TikTok, in the cool of reflection and able to consider only herself, Athena wouldn’t have chosen to kill Hunter for what he did. She wanted him *hurt*. She wanted him to *pay*. Honestly, killing him, even killing him hard, seemed too easy. He’d have a really bad night, and then any suffering, any guilt, any hard consequences would be over. It was his family who’d suffer the longest.

But it was too late to back away now. She’d put this all in motion. Not intentionally, exactly, but each time she’d tried to find a way to exact her own revenge and had been dissatisfied with her options, she’d elevated the situation until—exactly as

she'd thought, the precise reason she'd first wanted to keep it secret—the only option left was to kill him.

If she'd been able to keep it a secret, maybe ... but that thought chafed. Keeping it a secret would have meant Hunter going on with his little life, making TikToks about how she was crazy and garnering support from thousands of likeminded assholes, and a scary number of women who thought he was too hot to disbelieve. Keeping the secret would have been no kind of justice.

Maybe that was why she had sucked so incredibly bad at keeping it. Fuck, Sam had figured it out the very same morning. Then her mom had figured it out, then her dad had known something was really off. Mom had even figured out about the uterus blob before she had. It seemed like the dominoes had started falling immediately, leading to the inevitable conclusion.

As she'd expected, once her father knew, it was out of her hands. There was no way to keep him from going for Hunter and stripping him down for parts. And *fuck*, it pissed her off to have to constantly fight for her place in her own revenge. *She* was the one who'd been raped and betrayed by someone who was supposed to care for her. *She* was the one who'd been bitten like she was a dog in heat. *She* was the one who'd ended up with a blob. Now the men in her family were all, 'We can't let that bastard get away with it! Athena is one of ours! She's under the protection of the club! Grunt, growl, chest thump, howl.'

It also galled her that they were, in one respect, right. If she wanted him hurt, she couldn't do it on her own. She needed the club. That right there shifted the balance away from her.

WHICH COMPLETELY SUCKED. All of this was about reclaiming what he'd taken from her. She wanted him to feel frustrated and helpless, to have something awful happen to his body that he could do nothing about. *She* wanted that! Not just to make him suffer but to make him feel what he'd done to her.

To do that, she needed the club. In needing the club, she'd lost control over the result. Hunter would die, and it was too late for her to back out of the whole revenge thing and stop that happening, because now it was also about the Bulls and their precious reputation.

Her mother had warned her that to get the kind of revenge she wanted, she would have to give up control. And now she was having to fight her mom as well, because Mom wanted her to give up *all* control. She did not want Athena on the scene tonight.

“What I mean,” Mom answered her, “is this: you have never seen the club do their thing. You think you know what they do, but you don't. I *have* seen them do their thing, and it will change the way you see them all—your father, your boyfriend and best friend, your family. Do you want this in your head? Do you want to think of what they'll do to Hunter every time you look at Dad? Or Sam? I have never felt close to your Grampa D, and the reason is what I saw the club do to your father, on D's orders.”

Athena knew about that—Dad had a pretty serious burn scar on his shoulder, and a few smaller scars on his back, from the time, well before she'd been around, that he'd faced club punishment. She knew the broad strokes of the reason for the punishment, and more detail about what they'd done to him. “That was a vote. The club voted to do that, and they gave Dad a choice.” He could submit to being burned over flame, or he could leave the club. He'd chosen the flame, and thus the club.

Athena had always understood that story to be about her father's loyalty and bravery. He'd made a mistake and faced the consequences. Actually, *Mom's father* had really made the mistake, and Dad had taken on the blame for him. Athena saw the whole thing as a testament to her father's honor.

But Mom was waving off her take on it. “Technically, I suppose that's true. But you only know your Grampa. I know D, and I remember the kind of president he was. I'm not saying he's not a good man, and I know he's a wonderful grandfather. But he had a way of getting the club to do what he

wanted, to put his finger on the scale. Do you know what I mean?”

“He cheated?”

“No ... not cheated. Nothing so obvious as that. More that he used his influence in ways that weren't always ... honorable.” She shook her head briskly. “I don't know, starlight, and it's off the point anyway. I'm just saying, when you see what these men we love are capable of, it's not something you can erase from your memory, and it might change how you feel about them.”

There was literally nothing Dad or Sam could possibly do that would change her feelings. Certainly nothing they did to help her. She was sure of that. Anyway, she intended not to be an observer but a participant. She wanted to remove that jackass's dick. With a dull blade.

“You're right, Mom. What happened with Dad is off the point. It's completely different from this. What happens tonight is *for* me, and I will be there. Involved.”

When her mother put her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes again, Athena stood up. The conversation had come full circle, so there was no point continuing.

~oOo~

At the service-dog training ‘graduation’ ceremony not long ago, Athena had made the mistake of telling their trainer that she left Blanche home sometimes and had gotten a fairly stern lecture about the purpose of a service dog, and how keeping Blanche close and letting her work kept her training sharp. That was all well and good for normal people, but there were some extremely not-normal things in the Bulls world, where a dog—any dog—didn't belong. This fall had so far been basically nonstop chaos, so yes, she'd left Blanche back a few times. But when her life was as close to normal as it got, she kept her service dog with her.

Tonight was very much not a night for Blanche to come along. When Sam and Jay arrived, on their bikes, Athena tugged her jacket on and went back to her mother's office to tell her she was leaving Blanche home and ask her to feed her dinner. But when she and Blanche arrived at the open door to the office, Athena found Mom strapping her shoulder holster on.

"What are you doing?" Athena asked.

"I'm coming with you," Mom answered.

"What? Why? No!"

"Yes. You need someone there for you."

"They're all going to be there for me."

Mom grabbed her leather jacket from the arm of the Eames chair she'd inherited from her father. After she pulled it on, she signed, "That's not what I mean. I mean you need someone there for support when you see things you thought you understood."

"Mom—"

"I'm coming, Athena. With you or right behind you, I'm coming."

Athena knew the look on her mother's face. There was no point fighting, so she relented. "Does Dad know?"

Mom's smile had razor-sharp points. "Let's say he won't be surprised."

Her attention lifted to a point behind Athena and she nodded. Athena turned to see Sam at the doorway. "We have to move," he signed. "They're at the barn."

"Okay. My mom's coming."

Sam nodded. "I see that. Let's go."

"Wait! I need to let Blanche pee first." She could wait until they got back to feed Blanche and the kitties, but there was no way she'd make her poor girl cross her legs for the rest of the night.

Sam stepped into the hall and made an ushering sweep of his arm. “Hurry, baby. We can’t make them wait.”

~oOo~

The others had the club van, and Sam and Jay had ridden their bikes to pick Athena up. So her mom rode with Jay, and Athena rode with Sam. She couldn’t say whether her mother’s presence had a quelling effect on the way the guys rode; they were being careful, staying near the speed limit and not doing a lot of lane changes or lane-splitting, but that might have been more about not drawing attention.

Athena loved riding with Sam, and she especially loved riding at night, but on this particular night she was anxious. So anxious, she was holding onto Sam too hard; three times, he tugged on her hand and asked her to ease up a little because she was fucking with his balance.

Maybe thirty miles beyond the western outskirts of Tulsa, they pulled off the interstate onto a country road with no name beyond its state road number. There was no gas station at the junction, no lights on the road, no sign at all that people lived out here. They turned right at the top of the ramp and headed into the forest-bounded dark.

Athena had heard about ‘the barn’ and ‘the field,’ and she understood what those places were to the club, but she’d never been out here herself. As far as she knew, no one except the club and the people they needed to ‘deal with’ had ever been out here.

After ten or fifteen minutes riding through deep dark, they came to a T intersection with a narrower paved road and turned left. Now on their right was a vast field, and Athena found that even creepier than the walls of forest that had framed both sides of the other road. Anything could be in that empty black.

She wasn’t afraid of the dark—a lot of her best memories had happened outside in the dark—but this dark field, which

seemed miles wide and miles deep, was the opposite of a night sky. A night sky was as familiar as home. Even when clouds made a thickness unbroken by starlight, she knew the stars were there, and she knew exactly where they were. She had the map of the night etched in her brain. The field beside them now was a vast unknown, and it freaked her out a little.

Then they turned onto a rutted gravel road, barely more than a hiking trail, and the forest hunched in close, reaching out to grab at them. Still not as freaky as that field.

They arrived before a large, ancient barn that seemed about to fall over. The club van was parked near the closed sliding doors, as was Hunter's Accord. Light pushed weakly around the edges of the doors—but not, surprisingly, through the cracked and curling boards of the walls.

As they parked the bikes, one of the doors slid open, and Athena's dad walked out. A half-second flash of an expression showed when he saw Mom, but Athena didn't think it was surprise in that expression. More like resignation and a little bit of irritation. As if they'd argued about whether Mom would come, and he'd thought he'd won.

Silly man.

Dad came for Athena first and asked, "Are you ready for this?"

"How can she be?" Mom signed—and spoke—before Athena could respond. Dad and Mom exchanged a look that made it clear their argument was only on pause.

"I'm ready," Athena said.

Did she still feel some internal conflict? Yes. Always she would. She wasn't a killer, she didn't like to think of the people she loved as killers, and this was all her fault because she couldn't keep a secret no matter how hard she tried.

No. Hold up. What the fuck with that bullshit thought? It was *not* her fault. *Hunter* had done this. And the consequences for hurting a club daughter were ... this. Harsher than in the normal world? Maybe so. But in the normal world, Athena would be the one bearing the brunt of the consequences for

being raped, and Hunter would have gone about his stupid life thinking he could get away with it. Even if she'd done the 'right' thing and reported it to law. Law hardly ever helped rape victims get justice.

He'd fucked around. Now he was finding out.

Huh. Look at that. Internal conflict resolved. "I'm ready," she signed again.

Dad gave her his full attention. "You are going to see Dex work. It won't be as intense as it can get, because we need to be precise about the kind of injuries he gets. Right now, we've got him gagged, stripped to his underwear, and hung by his wrists. Dex's tools are laid out, and he's wearing coveralls, booties, and gloves. That's what you'll see. Nobody goes near him without gear on. We've got a story to tell, right?"

Athena nodded. The light coming from the open barn door wavered with motion from within.

"Look at me, starlight," Dad continued with a terse wave of his hand, and Athena returned her full attention to him. "You never discuss this with anyone who isn't here tonight. Understood? And you only *ever* mention it at home or the clubhouse, even with us."

Places he could be sure weren't bugged. "I understand," she told him.

He looked at Sam and Jay, and then at Mom. "Questions?" No one had a question. "Okay. Let's go."

As they all headed toward the barn, Sam reached for Athena's hand. She didn't know if he meant to offer her comfort or take some for himself, but she was far too tense just now to be able to tolerate her hand being restrained, even within Sam's large, strong grip. She gave him a quick squeeze, meaning *I love you, but not right now*, and slipped herself free.

Sam took the loss with an understanding nod, and they went into the barn.

Her first impression of the interior was surprise: it was a lot sturdier than it appeared to be from the outside. Outside, the barn looked ancient, like one good wind would turn it into

firewood. Inside, though it still looked primarily like a barn, it had strong, solid walls and reinforced support beams.

Camouflage. They'd built a new barn inside the skeleton of the original, so it looked like a rundown old neglected building on a rundown old neglected property. The thought made Athena smile. Her family was pretty smart.

Seeing her smile, Mom gave her a look that was both curious and censoring, both, *what are you smiling about* and *you shouldn't be smiling about anything here*. Not wanting to explain, Athena turned from that look and focused elsewhere.

Specifically, she focused on Hunter. As her father had described, Athena's raping ex-boyfriend was gagged, stripped down to his black Dolce & Gabbana boxer briefs, and hung by his wrists from a pulley-type contraption bolted to a crossbeam above their heads. The beam was fifteen or twenty feet up; they had Hunter high enough that his feet dangled several feet from the floor.

He was conscious, she could tell because he squirmed against the pressure on his arms and shoulders, but the way his body was oriented, he wasn't facing the door, so he didn't know she'd come in.

There was an old wooden worktable not far from where he hung. Three large steel trays covered the top, and each tray contained a careful array of scary-looking tools, which seemed to be organized according to different methods of torture: sharp, blunt, and hot. The other groups, not represented here, were cold and loud. (That was something she'd first learned from the TV show *Angel*, but her mom had told her it was pretty accurate.) The sharp tray had blades ranging from scalpels to a bone saw. The hot tray had a blow torch and several metal rods of varying sizes, as well as a jug of clear liquid that Athena didn't want to spend much time wondering about.

The blunt tray caught her interest most of all: three coils of steel chain, each of a different-size link. A regular hammer. A small sledgehammer. A rubber mallet. Several substantial rocks. Did they mean to stone him to death? That thought was

the first that came close to freaking her out—it was so prehistoric, so *biblical*, and that simplicity really drove home what they were doing. She had set in motion a murder. Of someone she knew. Someone she'd cared about.

No. She had not set this in motion. Hunter had. Period. This was the consequence of his actions. An execution, not a murder. This was justice. Any thought to the contrary needed to step the fuck off.

Dex, dressed head to toe in a hooded white coverall, black latex gloves, and white booties over his boots, came to her. His ASL was fair but not great, but he made a solid effort. He spoke as he signed, so Athena watched his mouth as well as his hands and filled in where his signs were wrong or missing. She really hated to read lips, but Dex was careful to shape his words so she could read them without trouble.

“Apollo says you want to be involved, not just watch. Yes?”

Athena looked at those trays. The first truth was no, of course she didn't want to be involved in this. Hurting and killing someone? She'd never even *punched* anyone except in Krav Maga training or playing around with Sam. It scared her to think of doing it now.

But the full, real truth was yes, she did want to be involved. Because she was the one who'd been raped. She was the one who wanted—needed—revenge. Or justice. Whatever its name, she needed satisfaction. The bloodless ways her mother had suggested had not satisfied. She needed blood. For that, she needed the men in her family, but she was not about to let someone else get her revenge. She was not about to let the rape she'd experienced become about her father's or Sam's honor. It was about her.

And she meant to take back what that asshole had stolen.

“Yes,” she told Dex and everyone else who was paying attention. “I want to be involved.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother shake her head. Athena kept her attention on Dex.

He nodded. “Okay. The end here is a car accident. We have the location, we know when and how to stage it. We can’t burn the car because the summer was too dry, and we can’t control the kind of fire that could happen. So anything we do to him before that needs to be consistent with injuries he’d sustain in the wreck. Understand?”

“Yes. What does that mean we do, then?”

“Blunt. Crushing. Some sharp, but any sharps should be with force and should be focused on his head. Lower body should be crush or blunt. There may be shit you want to do to him that feels like justice for what he did to you, but we can’t fuck with his junk. I’m sorry about that.”

That was what she really wanted: to take the thing he’d used to hurt her. But honestly, his dick was just a body part. His brain was the thing he’d really used to hurt her.

“That’s okay. I can focus on his head. That’s where the bad really is.”

Dex smiled slyly and glanced to Athena’s side—she realized Sam had been interpreting for her, so Dex understood everything.

“You’re a tough little cookie, Athena,” Dex said.

He turned then and apparently said something, because Jay seemed to answer, but nobody was signing or pointed in a way she could see enough of their mouths. She turned to Sam and raised her hands, asking.

“He’s telling people what he wants them to do. Jay is playing assistant. I’m with you.”

At that moment, Athena’s dad, now dressed in a coverall as well, grabbed Hunter’s legs and turned him around so he faced them all—and Hunter saw Athena there for the first time.

Hunter didn’t speak. Like Athena, he didn’t believe Deaf people should be expected to force themselves into unnatural acts just to fit in with the hearing world, and little seemed more unnatural than using a voice they couldn’t hear. As far as Athena knew, he made no sounds of any kind, though she

assumed there were some noises that just happened. Sam complained a lot about how loud she was, but he meant that she slammed doors and stomped around. He'd told her she made very few and infrequent sounds with her mouth.

Now, however, she was fairly sure Hunter was making some kind of noise. He was gagged, and the gag appeared to be something jammed into his mouth and then a strip of duct tape fixed over that, so if he was making noise, it probably wasn't loud. But he was frantic, and the muscles in his throat flexed stiffly.

When she'd come into the barn, he'd been squirming a little, like hanging that way hurt and he was trying to find some relief, but he'd been fairly calm. Dazed, or exhausted, or simply resigned. Immediately upon seeing her, he began to fight the chain.

Hunter was a jock. He was strong and fit, and he managed to pull his legs up so high it looked like he might be able to get them over the beam and maybe make this whole plan a lot more complicated.

Then Sam's dad grabbed the crank part of the pulley, and Hunter suddenly dropped about three feet. The drop and sudden stop did something obvious and strange to his arms. He threw his head back and, Athena was pretty sure, screamed.

The strange and obvious thing was a shift in his shoulders. They seemed to get longer.

And Dex and Simon were now arguing. They weren't signing, and she couldn't see enough to understand. Dammit! They needed to remember she was here!

Athena turned to Sam, but he was focused on the argument. Before she could grab him and get his attention, Mom came up and faced her.

"His shoulders dislocated when Simon dropped him," she explained. "That's not an injury consistent with their plan, and Dex explained that ... pointedly. Simon told him he can reset the shoulders, but Dex says there will be signs of the dislocations. They're working it out."

“I hate that nobody is signing. Not even Dad or Sam!”

“This is tense, Athena. Their focus is not on you but on what you want.”

That was the problem, how she kept getting forgotten in her own revenge. But she was tired of making the exact same point over and over, so she stood where she was, watched an argument she couldn't understand, and waited for something to happen.

Mom apparently decided that Athena didn't need to know the whole argument, but she eventually signed that “They've figured it out.”

Dad came over and handed Athena a coverall of her own. “Anybody that touches him needs to be suited up,” he explained. “If you don't want to touch him, just say the word.”

I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to, she thought. She raised her hands and very nearly made those words. She didn't want *any* of this. She wanted a world where she hadn't been raped.

But she lived in this world, and in it she had been raped. There was nowhere else to go but forward now, and no matter how sick all this made her, she would not stand by.

She took the coverall, gloves, and booties and put them on. Then she and her father walked up to Dex together. Sam came, too, but stopped a few feet back.

“He needed a few swipes to settle down when we grabbed him,” Dex told her, “but those don't count. You get to draw first blood.” He swept his hand over the trays like a demented game-show host. “What's your tool?”

Athena studied the trays. Sharp, hot, blunt.

She'd wanted this. She'd *insisted* on this. It was too late to back out, and she didn't think she would if she could. The best thing to do now was to lean in.

She picked up the rubber mallet. With a look, she asked Dex if that was a good choice. His subtle nod and small smile told her it was. “Use the side. The front and back will leave a

round mark, but the side won't—and you'll get about the same power to the hit. Do you mean to aim for his head?"

Again, Dex's signing was good enough for her to get the gist, but Sam interpreted so she got it all.

Yes, she did mean to aim for his head, but she was so fucking *short*. They'd have to put him all the way on the ground for her to reach him, and even then she wouldn't get great leverage. "I'm not sure I can reach," she told him.

"I got you, starlight," Dad said. He went to the side of the barn and dragged over an old metal chest. Just the right height for her to stand on.

How ridiculous that she needed a booster to be involved in torturing and killing a guy.

But she did, so she nodded at her father and followed him to Hunter. Dad helped her up onto the chest, and then she was face to face with the asshole for the first time since she'd sent him away from the cabin.

His eyes were wide and pleading. His head shook wildly back and forth. When she glanced up at his hands, she could see him trying to sign, but his fingers weren't cooperating enough for her to understand. She could guess, though. He was begging. Maybe he was finally apologizing. Not that an apology under these conditions meant shit. Not that his apology could ever mean more than shit under any conditions.

Athena stood on that chest with a rubber mallet in her hand and watched him struggle, watched his eyes beg for mercy. She remembered how hard she'd tried to get him to stop, how he'd responded by *biting* her.

She raised the mallet, cocked it back, and hit him straight in the middle of his face as hard as she could. The blow caved his nose almost completely in and knocked him unconscious. As his head fell forward, a stream and then a river of blood gushed down his bare chest.

All at once, she was done.

Was she satisfied? Yes.

But not because she'd caved his nose in. Not because he was about to die. Standing on the chest, Hunter senseless before her, she finally understood: his fear had been what she'd needed. She'd needed him bound and terrified and unable to make the horror stop.

That was what she needed. The rest of it was just ... the cost of getting it.

"Done," she signed and turned to her dad.

"Done?" he asked, surprised. When she nodded, he didn't push. He lifted her off the chest and set her on the ground.

"You did good," Dex told her. "That's a great hit. An airbag or steering wheel could do that." He removed the gag from Hunter's slack mouth—because, Athena realized, he wouldn't be able to breathe now that she'd ruined his nose, and they weren't ready for him to die yet.

She nodded to acknowledge Dex's compliment—if that was the right word—but she only cared what happened anymore insofar as it kept her family safe. She set the mallet down and walked away from the table and its trays.

"You okay?" Sam asked, peering into her eyes.

"Yes," Athena told him, and she meant it. She had gotten what she needed.

"If you're done," Mom said, walking up to them, "let's go. We don't need to be here for the rest of it."

"Yes, I do," Athena countered. Going would *feel* better, but it wouldn't *be* better. What happened next, her family did for her. She wasn't going to walk away from the truth of it.

She stood between her mom and Sam, with Sam's arm around her, and watched as her father, her uncles, her family, finished the job of killing the man who'd raped her.

Her father was the one who killed him. He used the rocks. He put them all in a canvas sack and swung it with all his might at Hunter's chest, back, and upper legs. Hunter lost consciousness again at the fifth hit and died somewhere around the tenth, when Dex called Dad off.

It was over.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Athena didn't want to go home, and she couldn't give him an idea where she'd rather go, so Sam took her to his place. It was a lot closer than hers, anyway.

He was worried. That scene in the barn had been intense. It wasn't the grossest thing he'd been part of since he'd first pulled on a blank kutte, or the bloodiest, or the scariest, but it was the hardest.

The bloodiest and scariest was the fight in Laughlin, obviously. The grossest—well, the list was longer there, but at the top was that tow job with the dead dogs. That had been really horrible and upsetting. But tonight was the first time he'd seen club justice played out so coolly. In Laughlin, he'd shot Jordan, and maybe that shot had ultimately been fatal, but Jordan had been aiming to kill him. In that very moment. It was hot and fast and do or die. That wasn't justice, it was self-defense.

He'd been in the hospital for the justice part.

Tonight, the cause, in his mind, was even more just, but the cold-blooded nature of the whole thing had kind of freaked him out. Even Apollo, obviously furious, swinging that sack of rocks as if with the force of each blow he could reverse time itself and save his daughter, had chosen his weapon carefully, for greatest damage consistent with their plan to get rid of Hunter without risk to the club.

There had been a mundanity to the scene, a sense that this was just part of the job, and *that* was what freaked Sam out. Hunter being dead? Not a worry. Sam would have happily killed him with his bare hands. But the workaday attitude of the Bulls as they did it, that was going to take some getting used to. Now that he was one of them.

None of that had him worried, however. Athena was the focus of his worries. She'd been extremely calm and purposeful through the whole thing, taking her piece of Hunter and then watching her family finish the job. Sam had thought

she was being her usual tougher-than-she-looked self and he'd been deeply proud and impressed by her.

But that rigid calm continued after the barn. She'd been barely responsive, almost robotic, since. Her signing was the ASL equivalent of monosyllabic, her expression flat and her movements stiff and mechanical.

He was no shrink, but he knew his girl, and he was sure she was traumatized by every part of this mess. She absolutely refused to see that, however, and he knew he couldn't suggest it to her himself. She needed him to be steady, she needed to feel sure he was on her side, and telling her she had trauma to deal with, while she was in active denial, would put a dent in that trust.

So he rode toward home with Athena wrapped stiffly around him, and he fretted. How could he help her? What help did she need? Was it enough just to be there and let her work through it in her own way?

Those questions tormented him all the way home. Rain was in the forecast for the night, so he stopped just outside the garage and helped Athena dismount, then walked his bike inside. When he heard Tank thundering toward the garage, he grinned.

His boy saw Athena first and charged at her. She saw him coming and got down low with her back to the garage wall; when Tank reached her, the odds were even that she'd end up flat on her back with a huge mastiff on her chest, and Tank outweighed her by almost double.

Instead, he slammed into her and was immediately hugged. As excited as he was, he seemed to understand how much she needed that hug, so he settled at once with his head on her shoulder and let her hold on.

Sam wished he'd brought his truck tonight; if he had, they could have stopped by her house and collected Blanche. For a service dog, she got left behind a lot. And Blanche was trained to do more than hear what Athena couldn't. She was also trained to keep Athena out of danger and be a steady presence

when she needed one. Athena could have had that hug a lot sooner.

She could have gotten it from Sam, too. But he understood how a dog was sometimes the only comfort that mattered.

When she had what she needed and let him go, Tank bathed her face with his tongue for a few seconds and then barreled at Sam for one of their special hugs. Sam had been only a few feet from Athena, so Tank didn't have a lot of runway to leap up. Not enough runway, in fact. He ended up driving his big boulder of a head into Sam's solar plexus and bouncing off. Neither of them came out of that completely unscathed.

But it made Athena laugh, and her laughter gave her some ease. She was still smiling as she stood.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he went to her.

"Stop asking that question. I've answered it."

Yes, but I'm not sure I believe your answer, he thought. "Sorry," he signed. "Want to go in?"

When she nodded, he put his arm around her and pulled her close. They walked up to the house, its windows aglow in the dark. Tank ran circles around them as they went.

They went in through the back door because that was the door everybody who belonged there used. Sam's mom was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a cup of tea, a plate that had obviously recently held a slice of apple pie, and a novel.

"Hi, kids," she said and signed. "What have you been up to this evening?"

Athena shot a look at Sam. She didn't sign, but he knew what she was asking with that look: she was surprised his mom didn't know where they'd been.

Unable to answer her now, he lifted his eyes upward, meaning he'd explain upstairs.

He told his mom, "Nothing big. Just hanging."

“Well, Mace and I were on our own tonight, so we grabbed Larissa from next door and went into town for some pizza. There’s no fresh leftovers, but there’s still some chicken casserole left to heat up if you’re hungry.”

Sam had skipped dinner, but the events of the night must have killed his appetite; food did not sound especially interesting. Not even his mom’s BBQ chicken casserole.

“Hungry?” he asked Athena. She shook her head. To his mom, she signed, “No, thank you, Aunt Deb.”

“We’re gonna go upstairs. Is Mace up there?”

Mom laughed. “He bailed on us in town. Robbie and Colt were in Pagliai’s, and after they decimated the pizza, they all went over to the Sawdust. I don’t expect him back until late.”

The Sawdust Arcade was a retro arcade of the kind that Mom and Dad said were big deals back when they were kids. It was full of those big token-operated video game machines with seriously terrible graphics, like Asteroids, Frogger, and a bunch of other titles from ancient video game history. It had opened in the summer and was enjoying a nostalgia boom that Sam didn’t see lasting forever. He’d gone in a couple times right after it had opened and at first thought it was cool, but the games were lame as fuck. He enjoyed his PS5, his VR rig, and his Alienware gaming computer much more. But Mason was into vintage shit, and Robbie and Colt, his best friends from high school, were into it, too, apparently.

“I guess Larissa went home?”

“Yep, when Aunt Leah got back from the hospital.”

“Any change with Gun?”

Mom sighed and shook her head. “Not the good kind. He’s got some problem in his abdomen. They’re trying to figure it out.”

“Bad problem?”

“I get the sense that it’s not a life-threatening problem but a humiliating one.”

Sam had enough guesses about what kind of abdominal problems could be more humiliating than dangerous and decided to stop asking questions. “Okay. I’ll try to visit tomorrow. We’re goin’ up.”

Mom gave him a weird, sidelong look.

“What?”

She chuckled. “I don’t know. I think ... it’s fine.”

“Mom?”

Still smiling, looking at Athena, Mom explained, “I think it’s the first time you’ll be up there together since things have changed between you, and I had a little mom moment, wondering if I should tell you to keep your door open or something. But then I remembered that you’re adults, so ... I guess I’ll ask instead that you keep it down. It’s okay that you do grownup things together, but I’d rather not hear it, thanks.”

Sam was deeply relieved to see the bright, full smile on Athena’s face. “I won’t know how loud we are, but I promise I’ll be gentle with him,” she told his mother.

“Oh god, please go away now,” Mom replied, laughing.

~oOo~

Tank followed them into the room and absorbed most of their attention for a good five minutes of double-team cuddle time, until Sam told him enough was enough and sent him to lie in his bed in the corner.

As soon as her hands were free, Athena asked, “Your mom doesn’t know about tonight?”

Sam shook his head. “No. Dad doesn’t tell her much unless she asks directly, and I’m not going to tell her anything he doesn’t. Whatever they worked out about how much Mom should know, it’s obviously different from your parents.”

“Yeah, I think my mom knows everything, except whatever’s officially under chapel seal.”

“It’s weird,” he observed. “Until I got into the chapel, I never really thought about what kind of secrets the club keeps.”

“But you do now?”

“I don’t know if I *think* about it much, but I see it now, and I’m starting to see the differences in the ways the patches talk about shit with their old ladies.”

“Is that what I am?” Athena asked. “Your old lady?”

The question pulled Sam up a little. He wasn’t afraid of it, but he was surprised. It was one of those occasional strange moments that lit up the change in their relationship in flashing neon. Athena was still his best friend, but now she was also ... “Yeah, you are,” he answered.

Whatever he’d expected her reaction to be, he had not expected the sad little laugh, or the way she stood and walked to the window to look out over the dark farm.

He followed her, stood behind her and watched her reflection. When he saw her eyes lift to his image in the glass, he asked, “Are you okay?”

As soon as he asked, he regretted it; she’d told him repeatedly that she was fine and tired of answering the question, and each time she was a little more irritated. But he knew she was *not* okay. He didn’t know how to ask so she’d give him a real answer.

They were in uncharted territory. Nothing about what Hunter had done or the consequences—for him and for Athena—was within their realm of experience.

Athena turned and shouldered him out of her way as she stomped to the middle of his room. Then she spun on her heel to face him again. “*Why* do you keep asking me that? I’ve answered it a dozen times, just tonight! I am fine. Do you *want* me to be fucked up? Is that it? Do you need to be all manly and take care of me? I’m sorry I’m not falling apart over this, but I am *fine*. Why do you need me to be weak?”

Her hands flew so quickly he could barely keep up. But when she finally stopped, he answered, “I don’t need you to be

weak. I know you're fierce as fuck. But what happened—”

“He raped me, and he paid for it. That's what happened.”

“Yes. He did something seriously fucked up to you. And we killed him for it tonight. It would hardly mean you're weak if you're fucked up over this.”

“*We* didn't kill him tonight. You only watched,” she said and then crossed her arms.

Sam's breath caught in his throat. Was she *angry* that he hadn't participated more? She'd wanted to control things. He hadn't stood back because he didn't want to hurt that fucker, he'd stood back because he hadn't wanted to get in her way.

“Are you mad that I didn't hurt him?”

She stood there, two feet away from him, her arms crossed and her expression tight, and didn't answer for a long time. Long enough for Sam to start to really worry that this would do them damage.

When they'd been best friends only, they'd had plenty of arguments and a few real fights, but he'd never worried too much; they always worked it out within a day or two at the very most. Now, though, his whole future, his whole happiness, was bound to Athena, and every bump seemed to shake the earth beneath his feet.

Maybe his future had always been bound to Athena, but he realized it now, and that made it seem all the more fragile. Like when they'd found out that the big, weird old bottle Dad had tossed his spare change into most of his life was from the eighteenth century and worth thousands of dollars.

“I'm not mad at you for standing back,” Athena finally told him. “I'm not mad at you at all. I'm just ... mad. Period. I'm mad all the time.”

And that was why he kept asking if she was okay, even knowing how much she hated it. Her mood had been boiling for weeks now. She was running hot, and she was going to burn out. Tonight, after everything, and with her seeming so distracted, Sam thought maybe the burnout was at hand.

She took a step closer. “I’m taking my mad out on you. I’m sorry. But please stop asking me if I’m okay. I am.”

Despite his worry, it was time to give her what she was telling him she needed—but he meant to keep his focus sharp in case what she needed changed. “I’ll stop asking. But you tell me if you’re ever not okay. I’m here, and I want to be what you need. You’re my Frosie.”

The silly nickname made her smile. He’d first used it as a joke, but now it had real meaning. She lifted her hand and set it on his cheek. Bending into the touch, he turned his head to kiss her palm.

“You *are* what I need,” she signed. “I love you. And I love that your beard is back.”

“I love you so much.” He caught her hand and set it back on his cheek. “And I’ll never shave again.”

“Or let anybody else shave you.”

“Well, unless you want to sometime.”

“Never happen.” She scratched lightly through his beard, watching her hand as she did. Then she slid it back over his ear, into his hair, and began to stroke. God, he loved the way that felt.

The air in his room changed suddenly, like a storm front moving in.

When he brushed his hands over her head and set them on her shoulders, she took the last half-step that remained between them. Now her body was pressed to his, and she tipped her head back to meet his eyes. She wasn’t smiling, didn’t try to make any words. He was the same. They stood like that, so close, and dived into each other’s eyes.

Her hand slipped from his hair and her fingertips danced over his jawline, then to his neck, tracing the red seam of his freshly healed wound, and down to his chest. She slid both hands under his kutte and pushed it from his shoulders. He shrugged it off, let it fall down his arms, caught it, and tossed it to the old chair in the corner where he piled the worn clothes that weren’t dirty enough for the laundry.

“You want to?” he asked. It was a dumb question, since she was undoing the buttons of his flannel, but he had to ask, had to have her answer, had to be sure. The night had not been full of things one could mistake for foreplay.

“Dummy,” she sighed and pushed his shirt off his shoulders.

He shook his arms out of that and let it drop to the floor.

He was about to help her out of her jacket when she set both hands on his chest and began to explore. She’d seen his bare chest plenty of times, and she’d touched it often enough, but the way she touched him now was new. Even in the limited time of their sexual connection, this was new. She touched him like she was memorizing him.

Her fingers traced the contours of his muscles, drew small circles around his nipples, swept outward to frame his sides, then back to the center, following the shallow rift that separated each ab. When she reached the waistband of his jeans, he caught her hand and lifted it to his mouth.

She let him kiss her fingertips before she pulled her hand free. “I want to have you in my mouth.”

That, too, would be new for them. Sam wasn’t sure he could bear it. The sight of her making those words had him about half gone already.

“You don’t have to,” he told her.

She rolled her eyes at him. “I know that. I want to.”

Sam leaned back against his desk and gave her what she wanted.

First, she shed her jacket and tossed it to his laundry chair. Then she undid his belt, opened his jeans, and reached into his underwear. The feel of her hand wrapping around him yanked a grunt out from way down in his belly.

Apparently dissatisfied with the room she had to work, she let him go and tugged on his jeans. He lifted off the desk and helped her get the jeans and his underwear down from his hips.

Then Athena dropped to her knees. Goddamn.

And then she put her beautiful mouth on him, and Sam was pretty sure this was going to kill him.

With Athena's hand at his base, most of the rest of him in her mouth, and her other hand resting on his belly, Sam forgot all about the barn, all about their argument, all about anything and everything that wasn't this moment. If he could have plucked it out of time and encased it in glass, he would have.

She flicked her tongue over his tip, squeezed her hand around his shaft, sucked him deep, let him go, licked him like a lollipop, sucked him deep again. Then the hand on his belly slipped downward and took hold of his balls.

"*Fuck,*" he gasped. She couldn't hear him, but it didn't matter. He just needed to say it out loud.

She pulled back and tucked her hair behind her ears. As she took him into her mouth again, Sam gathered up that thick, dark mass and held it in his hands. With that, Athena decided to get down to business. She gave up teasing, gave up exploring, and sucked him off.

Sam wanted to watch—*god* he wanted to watch—but it was all so fucking intense, every sensation so much more vibrant than he could process, so much more than he'd ever felt with anybody else, he simply could not control enough of his body to keep watching or to keep holding her hair. His head fell back, he grabbed the edge of his desk, and he fell headlong into the experience.

When his finish arrived, it hit him like a blast. He didn't know how to tell her he was close, didn't know how to warn her, and when it occurred to him he could at least tap her shoulder or something, it was too late. A fucking nuclear bomb went off in his gut—and Athena stayed on him, taking it all, finally easing off gently and finishing him with a sweet little peck to his tip.

She looked up at him with a smug little smirk, and Sam laughed before he had his breath back.

"You are great at that," he told her.

Her smirk got even smugger, and it was the cutest fucking thing he'd ever seen.

“I know.” She wiped the corners of her mouth with a prim fingertip.

Sam dropped to his knees and kissed the shit out of her. Then he gathered her up in his arms and took her to his bed, where he could thank her properly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

On her lunch break the next day, sunny and warm like a goodbye kiss from the summer, Athena sat at one of the picnic tables in the dog yard and began laying out her lunch: chunky chicken salad with avocado on a croissant, apple slices with cinnamon, and iced tea. Yum.

The dog yard was on the side of the school opposite the playground, and nobody else was currently over here. Athena appreciated having the place to themselves, but Blanche could obviously hear kids playing. She'd done her business and was now at the fence, ears perked, staring toward a playground she couldn't see.

Ever since she'd been a student at this school, Athena had brought her lunch. The cafeteria served pretty good food, actually, but Athena didn't like the busyness in there. Too bright, too much going on, too many people and things to navigate. Even as a child, she'd sought out a lonely place where she could read or knit. These days, she mainly knitted. With Christmas coming up, she was knitting in pretty much every free moment.

She'd finished the blanket for her parents, and three pairs of marled socks for Grammo, and fingerless gloves for Grampa D, who'd been complaining that his hands got too cold to work on his models. Now she was working on a sweater for Sam. She'd found a beautiful half-zip pattern with a shadow cable stitch, and an excellent yarn in a dusty celadon that would really make his eyes pop.

When she was done with her lunch, she'd get that project out of her knitting bag and finish her break focused on that. Right now, she needed something to focus on; otherwise her brain ran to the events of the night before and made a mess.

She really wasn't freaked out about what they'd done to Hunter. She wasn't thrilled that it had been necessary, but she had worked her way to an understanding and acceptance that it had, in fact, been necessary. The weird thing, though: she was still so fucking *angry*. Hunter was dead, he'd died helpless and

afraid, and she'd needed that—not the death but the fear, the loss of agency. There was nothing left to be angry about. Well, there was the uterus blob, but she had an appointment to eradicate that coming up—on Halloween, which seemed grimly fitting. And then it would all be over.

Maybe she'd be mad until it truly was over.

But shit, this constant rage was exhausting. And it fucked with her already dodgy digestion.

Her feelings were maybe complicated, but she didn't think guilt was among the complications—except for the potential guilt of getting her family in trouble for the way they'd helped her. That was probably the reason her brain kept trying to make trouble.

Probably a dozen times this morning, until work had gotten busy enough to distract her, she'd checked online for news about an accident in the rural stretch between Tulsa and the City. There hadn't been anything yet—at least not the last time she'd checked. That had been a couple of hours ago, and she was trying not to start checking again.

She was just finishing her apple slices and congratulating herself on leaving her phone alone when Blanche trotted toward the gate. Athena looked over and saw Olivia and Kenneth coming in.

Her work buddies came over and plopped side-by-side on the other bench of the table.

“Sitting out here by yourself as usual,” Olivia chastised.

“I like it. Anyway, I thought you had lunch duty today, Kenneth.”

His eyes popped wide. “Tara owed me one, and I collected. We needed to see how you were handling the news.”

“What news?” Athena asked, her heart pounding a little faster, a little harder.

“You don't know?” Olivia asked.

“Obviously I don't. What?”

Olivia and Kenneth exchanged that look that meant they knew something big and couldn't wait to share it but weren't sure how. Athena was sure they were about to tell her something she already knew.

Then Kenneth stood and came around to sit at her side, setting Blanche's service vest out of the way, and she was even more sure.

"Hunter is dead, Athena."

Athena had no idea what kind of actress she could be. She had recent evidence to suggest she was a terrible liar, but hopefully that was only the case with family. "What?" she signed, trying to look like she didn't understand. "When? How? What?"

Kenneth gave her leg a consoling pat before he answered. "Eric talked to Mr. Cruz. Hunter had an accident coming back from visiting his grandpa. He ran off the road on a turn, went over a bluff and landed in the river below."

"Oh my god."

They both nodded gravely. Kenneth told her, "They told Mr. Cruz he probably died instantly." He tilted his head and peered at her. "Are you okay?"

Though she'd come to despise that question with the heat of a million suns, Athena honestly thought about her answer, trying to give the best one. "I mean ... yes? It's awful, and I'm sad for his family, but ... yeah, I'm okay."

"You're not sad for you? You two were together a long time," Olivia pointed out needlessly.

"Yeah, I know. I'm ... shocked, mainly, I guess."

Olivia didn't seem satisfied with that answer. "You are so weird, Athena."

"Why?"

"You always act so tough. It's like you don't have feelings."

“That’s a shitty thing to say,” Athena told her, not acting at all. She was honestly hurt.

“It kind of is, Olivia,” Kenneth added.

Olivia had the grace to blush. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be shitty. I just meant it’s okay to be sad about Hunter. I know you two broke up badly, and Hunter said some nasty shit about you after, but you were a couple for *years*. It doesn’t make you weak or pathetic or anything like that to be sad that he died.”

“I’m not trying to be tough, Olivia. I just don’t know how I feel about it yet. Maybe I’ll be sad when the shock wears off.”

Kenneth put his arm around her back “And we’ll be here for you when that happens.”

“Thanks,” she said and rested her head on his soft shoulder.

The need for comfort was real now, as she worried about her performance during this talk.

~oOo~

News of Hunter’s ‘accident’ blazed through the school that afternoon, and any plans for the day went off the rails. Hunter had been a popular teacher, so everybody—not only the faculty and staff but the students as well—was talking about his death, and most mourned it.

Probably everybody but Athena was in mourning. She spent most of the afternoon working very hard to seem like she was exactly the right amount of upset for a woman learning about the death of her ex-boyfriend.

It wasn’t as hard as she feared; she was quite upset about a lot of things regarding Hunter and how he’d died. It was just a matter of making sure she appeared surprised and sad and not guilty or anything like it.

Not that she regretted his death. But regret and guilt weren’t the same thing, and she was, in fact, guilty of his

death.

Making sure her reactions balanced on that line was exhausting.

A few minutes after lunch, while she and Blanche were in the tutoring center preparing for the next sessions, Athena got a text from her father:

*H's death on the World site
about 30 mins ago.*

You okay?

Noticing the careful phrasing of her father's text, Athena sent back something equally vague.

*I'm okay. Everybody's
talking about it here.*

LMK if you need anything.

Love you.

I will. Love you, too, Daddy.

Within the first hour after the news went live, Athena had gotten texts from Sam and Mom as well, similarly checking in, and she responded with similarly vague assurances that she was okay.

But the day was hard. Her tutoring sessions got virtually no actual work done, and every minute of her little breaks during students' passing periods was taken up by people wanting to feed on her thoughts and feelings about the sudden death of her recent boyfriend.

Perhaps because she wasn't actually grieving, Athena saw all these brief encounters with her colleagues—all of whom she was friendly with, though only a few were actual friends—for what they probably truly were. Not real gestures of comfort or support for a woman they assumed was grieving a loss, but a feeding frenzy. They were hungry for the drama. Athena didn't fret too much about her lack of tears; she had a well-earned rep for not crying. She didn't even cry during the annual Upper School screening of *Schindler's List*.

About ninety minutes before the end of the day, the headmaster cancelled classes and called everyone into the assembly hall. They spent the remainder of the day in an impromptu memorial service, with students, teachers, and staff taking turns offering a remembrance of some wonderful thing Hunter did.

That assembly was the worst of it by far. First was the simple fact that everybody expected her to offer her own remembrance, and each time one person was finished it seemed like the entire school body turned to see if she would be next. She was never next.

For a while, she tried to compose a thing to share, but it all felt fake and infuriating, and she was too angry and emotionally torqued to trust herself not to share something extremely bad—like what that ‘great guy’ who was ‘so nice’ and ‘so fun’ and ‘so helpful’ had actually done. Once she understood that there was nothing that could induce her to stand up and share a ‘remembrance’ of Hunter, she leaned into acting like she was too upset to share.

The really, really hard part about the assembly, though, was all the remembrances that were shared. She sat there as students recalled his unbridled enthusiasm for Field Day, or the way he always did anything he asked them to do in gym class, right along with them. They shared stories of Hunter sitting with a kid whose parents were running extremely late—or who’d straight-up forgotten to pick up their child—and how patient he was with students struggling with a skill.

A whole lot of stories about how great Hunter Cruz was. The image of him constructed in the assembly hall that afternoon was nothing like the guy who’d landed on her sleeping back and forced himself into her while she fought to get free of him, and who’d told all of TikTok that *he’d* broken up with *her* and she’d gone crazy when he did it.

But the good-guy image was the man she’d thought he was. Especially back before they’d starting dating, and in the early days of their relationship. Once they’d become comfortably settled as a couple, some cracks emerged in his good-guy case, like the times he’d dumped her, then come

running back in a week or two. But most of the cracks were much smaller than that, only hairline fractures. When they'd been together, she'd chalked those cracks up to nobody being perfect. Sam had always maintained that Hunter was a jerk to her, but she hadn't felt that.

Not until the cabin.

A weird little worm started wriggling around in Athena's brain, slithering through her memories, making her doubt ... everything. Even the rape. *Had* it been only a misunderstanding? Had he thought she was into it? In the first days after, when she'd been trying to keep it a secret, she'd explained that things had gotten rough and she hadn't liked it, so she'd broken up with him—a lie as close to the truth as she could get.

But what if it hadn't been a lie? What if it had been the actual truth? Had Hunter thought they were just having rough sex? They never had before, but he had been drunk. Maybe he'd wanted to try something new?

Holy shit. Had she gotten him killed over a misunderstanding? Athena's heart began to thud hard enough to hurt.

No, wait. Wait. What had he said when she'd confronted him the next morning? That she was his girlfriend, so he couldn't have raped her. His exact words had been *It's not rape just because you weren't into it*.

She would never forget those words, no matter how old and senile she got.

Hunter had raped her, and then he'd tried to gaslight her. Badly, but he'd tried. And then he'd told the world *she* was the bad guy.

Unable to bear another second of this 'memorial,' she and Blanche walked out. Olivia, Kenneth, and several other people—maybe every other person—noticed and watched, but she didn't care. Let them think she was too upset to stay.

It wasn't far from the truth.

~oOo~

Pulling into the driveway at home that evening, Athena sighed. Aunt Deb's truck was parked at the curb. The Spellmans and Armstrongs were having a family dinner tonight, and Athena had forgotten.

She'd also forgotten the errand her mother had asked of her that morning: to run by the Sun-Flour Bakery and pick up something for dessert. So Athena backed out of the driveway and headed off again.

The Sun-Flour was only a few miles from the house. Jerry Ravelle, the owner and head baker, was deaf, so he, his wife Ann, and their son Pete were all fluent in ASL.

Though she didn't speak, Athena could shop at stores where the staff didn't know ASL. She had an app in her phone that pronounced an array of common statements for an array of scenarios, including shopping, and she kept her notes app handy for anything a canned statement couldn't help with. For the understanding-them part, she read lips. It was a pain in the ass, and hit or miss whether she was getting it right, but it was something—and now that she had Blanche, there was no more initial awkwardness where the clerk didn't know Athena couldn't conduct her business exactly like everybody else. Blanche's work vest said HEARING SERVICE DOG DO NOT PET, so as soon as they saw the dog, clerks knew Athena wouldn't hear them.

Thus, she wasn't limited only to Deaf-friendly businesses—good thing, since there weren't many. But there was nothing like going into a shop and knowing she was not only welcome, but she was the normal one there. Shops like the Sun-Flour were inside her happy bubble of normal life.

It was late, and the shop was about to close—literally; Mr. Ravelle was carrying the little café chairs and tables off the sidewalk as Athena pulled up. He saw her and grinned as he set his burden down so he could greet her.

“Hi Athena! How are you, sweetheart?”

“I’m good, Mr. Ravelle. How are you? How’s Mrs. Ravelle?”

“She’s wonderful as ever. She’s inside and will be glad to see you. It’s been a minute.”

“Yeah. I’ve been crazy busy this fall. I’m sorry to come so late, but we’re having friends over for dinner. Mom asked me to pick up dessert, but I forgot. Is there anything you’ll still sell me?”

“Sell you? I don’t know about that. By now, everything’s a little aged, so you can have whatever you want. Come on in and see if there’s anything left you like.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll pay. You should get paid for your hard work.”

Mr. Ravelle grinned. “Just hire me to do your wedding cake when you find The One.”

Athena laughed. “If I ever get married, it’s a promise.”

She hadn’t thought she wanted to get married, or have kids, or do any of the white-picket-fence stuff, but with Sam ... maybe. The marriage part, anyway. Maybe. Or they could just live together forever. That would be okay, too. The forever part was for sure. The rest of it was negotiable.

Following Mr. Ravelle into the shop, Athena took a deep, enticing sniff. Coffee and pastries: few scents could beat that one. Mrs. Ravelle was hunched behind a glass case, wiping the shelves. She saw Athena through the front and grinned, then stood.

“Athena! How are you, crumb bun?” Mrs. Ravelle had silly food nicknames for most of her long-time customers, particularly the ones she’d first met as children.

“I’m good, Mrs. R. You look great. I like your new cut.”

Mrs. Ravelle patted her hair. “Thank you. Are you looking for something sweet?”

“She needs dessert for her mama’s dinner party,” Mr. Ravelle told her. “She forgot to come by earlier.”

“Well, we can’t let a dinner party end without a sweet touch, can we? Let’s see what we’ve got left that’s worthy.” She turned and studied the mostly empty pie spinner. “There’s a pecan, a pumpkin cheesecake, and an apple—no! I have it. We’ve got one maple apple pie left. Your mama ordered that last year, and I think your dad really liked it.”

“I remember. He did. A lot. We all did. That would be great!”

As Mrs. Ravelle packaged the pie in a pink box, Mr. Ravelle returned to the front to keep pulling the seating in from the sidewalk.

Mrs. Ravelle finished the packaging off with a piece of paper tape covered in pink sunflowers and a rose-gold foil sticker on the top with the shop’s logo. Then she asked, “Can your baby have a treat?”

Athena glanced down at Blanche. She was working, but Athena could give her treats on the clock. She also realized that the Ravelles hadn’t met her dog yet.

“Yes, thank you! This is Blanche.”

“She’s beautiful.” Mrs. Ravelle opened the glass canister of baked dog treats and withdrew one shaped like a fall leaf. “Peanut butter.”

Athena took the treat, turned to Blanche, and asked her to shake. She sat promptly and offered her shaggy paw. “Good girl!” Athena signed and gave her the cookie—and Blanche thought that was one of Athena’s better ideas.

“Please let me pay for the pie,” she told Mrs. Ravelle. “It’s too beautiful to be free.”

“It’s a gift. Don’t make a gift about money, crumb bun.”

“Sorry. Thank you.”

Mrs. Ravelle gave her a smile and a wink, and sent her on her way.

As Athena drove back home, her mood was lighter. That little slice of normalcy was precisely the reset that her weird

day had needed, and now she could think clearly about all the weirdness.

Hunter was dead. A car accident was the official reason, and the gossips today had swallowed that story whole. He could no longer hurt her or anybody else, and he'd paid for the hurt he'd caused. Soon, she'd go up to Kansas and have the uterus blob removed, and it would all be over.

And she had Sam. In all the ways she'd always had him and wonderful new ways she hadn't realized she needed.

Back to her regularly scheduled life, everything as it should be.

~oOo~

“He'll get over it,” Dad said and signed. Then he shoved a forkful of tri-tip into his mouth and chewed. “Once he takes a beat, he'll understand we did it the only way we could. He's fucking batshit if he thinks I was going to let it be put to a *vote*.”

When Athena returned with the maple apple pie, Mom and Aunt Deb had been in the kitchen. It had been instantly clear that whatever Aunt Deb hadn't known last night, she was fully up on the situation now—like *fully* up. She even knew that Athena was pregnant and had an appointment not to be.

The only one among the two families who didn't know everything was Mason. Athena would love it if he remained in the dark forever, but she understood the way her family worked and didn't have a lot of hope about that. At any rate, he hadn't come tonight, so everyone was speaking freely.

Soon enough, however, everybody would know the whole story. Athena had just learned that Uncle Eight also knew everything, because Dad and Uncle Simon had gone together to tell him.

And Eight was angry.

“My point,” Uncle Simon replied, “is that Eight’s been extra tense. The Eureka shit has him twisted up, and the shit that went down in Laughlin tightened the ropes. We have to make sure he *does* understand that we did it right. I know you think the club had no place in the decision, and I understand why. I don’t think I’d feel different if I had a daughter in that situation. But there were *five* patches in the barn last night. The club *was* involved, and we didn’t give the president a heads-up. He’s pissed for a good reason, even if he’s more pissed than is reasonable. If Eight thinks whole chunks of the table are working behind his back, that’s big trouble.”

“I have called Eight a lot of things in the many years I’ve known him,” Dad replied, “but paranoid isn’t one of them.”

“And yet I’m surprised you and I got out of his office without bleeding today. He’s under siege, Apollo. You have to deal with him as a patch at the table, not a father protecting his child.”

“What’s your concern about Eight?” Mom asked—and the three patches at this table all focused on her. “Is he becoming a problem?”

“Don’t, J,” Dad said. Athena saw the way her mother’s neck and shoulders went rigid at the rebuke.

Mom leaned in toward Dad. “Then don’t fucking talk about this shit at the dinner table. You think because you tell me what’s going on you’ve done your part, but when you shut me down, you are not keeping your promise. I don’t have a vote in the chapel, but here, you best fucking believe I have a say.”

Aunt Deb and Uncle Simon exchanged a look that suggested similar discussions had been had at the farm. Sam was obviously uncomfortable.

Athena clapped her hands and drew everyone’s attention to her. “As the reason for all this, I want a say.”

Dad smiled a little—one of those Dad smiles that meant he was both irritated and proud. “Go ahead.”

“What if I talk to Uncle Eight?”

“No, Athena,” Mom responded at once.

“Hold up,” Sam said. “I think it’s not a bad idea.”

“Go on, son,” Uncle Simon said—and all of a sudden, the men were talking amongst themselves again, when Athena was trying to have her say. At least Sam glanced at her and let her know he understood what was happening before he went ahead and did it.

“Eight won’t lose his shit at her, for one thing,” Sam said. “I think he’s a little ... afraid of her, or something? Like he’s worried he’ll break her if he’s not careful. So he’ll listen and try to be nice. And she’s good at making her point.” He laughed. “She’s good at getting her way, really. That’s why she was even there last night. Have you ever had anybody who wasn’t a patch in the barn before, not counting the ones you were there to hurt?”

Dad shook his head in another of those familiar gestures of irritation and pride. “Yeah, difficult women are my jam. It would seem.”

Mom flipped him off, and Dad returned the favor. But that was good—that was a common, flirty way for them to end a fight. There were other ways they ended fights, but those were mainly the sort Athena really preferred not to think about.

Meanwhile, Sam had just made the point Athena had intended to make—with a little bit of condescension on top, maybe. She was annoyed, but the parental types all laughed or (in her mom’s case) relaxed a little, so she couldn’t work up a full mad about it.

She couldn’t let it pass unremarked, however. “Yeah. That was going to be my point. I can make him see reason.”

Uncle Simon picked up the plate of asparagus. “It’s not a bad idea,” he said as he plucked some spears for his plate. “What’s the word from the mayor’s office? Do we know if the story is going down right?”

Dad took a long drink of his beer before he answered. “Yeah, looks good. But we won’t be fully in the clear until the

autopsy comes back. There's a rush on it, so it should be done in a few days."

"Why are they doing an autopsy?" Athena asked.

"They always do in a case like this," Sam answered. "For police reasons and insurance."

Dad nodded. "Right. That's why we had to be careful in the way we did it, so the evidence is consistent with an accident."

"We can talk about this here?" Sam asked, looking suddenly worried.

But Athena's father laughed fully. "Sam. Do you think I would allow my home to be anything but perfectly secure?"

"Sorry," Sam replied. "Obviously you wouldn't."

"Like I said," Dad went on, "we have to be careful where we talk and who we talk to, but this—the house, these people, it's safe."

Sitting at her family's table, with Sam, her person above all others, and his parents, who'd half raised her as her parents had half raised him, Athena understood her father's words to mean so much more than their protection from law snooping out their secrets.

These people had put themselves on the line for her without hesitation—in fact, they'd fought her about it. She'd tried to protect them, and instead they'd gathered her up and fought for her.

This was her safe place. This house, these people. Sam. She was safe here.

"Thank you," she signed. "All of you. I love you. Thank you so much for having my back."

For a moment, the table went still. Everyone around it looked at her, their expressions somber and steady. Then Mom took a deep breath and reached out to hook her hand over Athena's forearm. Sam reached out to lay his hand over hers. Aunt Deb got up from her seat, came around behind Athena's chair, and wrapped her arms around her. Uncle Simon and Dad

sat in place and watched, but she could see in their eyes that they, too, were moved.

She was safe and loved. Right here.

She'd always known that, and yet today it felt new and fiercely deep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“So it’s goin’ good, then?” Duncan asked.

Jay laughed and punched him hard in the arm. “You sound like a chick, Dunc.” He flipped his hair and put on a high-pitched voice. “Oooh, I really hope everything is going good in your *relationship*! You two are so cute I could *die*!”

Duncan rubbed the punched spot. “Fuck off. Like you’re not all in your feelings about *your* relationship these days. Asshole.”

Sam let those two play out their dumb scene and focused on his burger. The group of patches who had begun calling themselves the ‘Young Guns’—Jay, Duncan, Chris, Monty, and Sam—were all off the clock at the same time for the first time in pretty much ever, and they’d decided to ride out together to see Gunner in the hospital. First, they’d stopped at Hal’s for a good greasy lunch.

It was a couple days before Halloween, and the diner was festooned with orange and black decorations: blinking lights and twisted crepe paper draped in the windows, black cats and ghosts hanging from the ceiling, and pumpkins made out of that funky accordion paper on each table. Most of the decorations looked like they’d seen a few Halloweens; the pumpkin on their table had several old grease spots. Still pretty festive, though.

He answered Duncan’s question. “Yeah, things are good. Between us, things are great. For her, it’s been ... well, you know Athena. Her feelings about it all are hard to suss out completely.”

Tough but not stoic. It put Sam in a weird place. Seeing that she was hurting while hearing her insist she was not.

Tomorrow morning, Sam was driving Athena up to Kansas and Planned Parenthood. Her appointment was first thing Halloween morning, so they were going up a day early and staying the night in a nearby motel. In fact they were staying two nights, because she was doing a medication abortion,

and they wanted her to stay close for a while to make sure everything went right.

Sam felt strange about the whole thing. Not that she was having an abortion—he was a thousand percent on board with undoing the last of what that asshole had done—but he had a lot of feelings about everything that Athena was dealing with, and how little she allowed herself to take comfort from anyone, and what his role was now. He understood that his role was to ‘be there’ for her and of course he wanted to be there, and was, would always be, but Athena’s need to be tough and her insistence that she wasn’t especially upset by it all worried him a lot. He felt like he wasn’t doing enough for her by doing only what she told him she needed.

But she’d asked him to be the one to go with her, and that was an active thing he could do: he could take care of her before, during, and after the procedure. They would have an interpreter there for her, but he hoped they’d let him stay with her the whole time.

He hoped she’d want him to. He hadn’t asked about that yet.

For all the reasons Sam’s family and hers had discussed over dinner the other night, the whole club knew most of the details about what they’d done to Hunter and why. For obvious reasons Athena hadn’t wanted that, but she understood it was unavoidable. If there were any negative consequences for the club, they couldn’t be blindsided.

The news was good regarding the chance for negative consequences. The expedited autopsy had confirmed the initial finding about cause of death: extensive trauma from a car accident. The police had closed the case. That boded well for the club—but they knew better than to relax completely.

The very next day after they’d talked about it at dinner, Athena had sat down with Eight and worked her will on him, as Sam had figured she would. Eight was still angry about such a big thing happening without the foreknowledge of the club, but he wasn’t calling it a betrayal or throwing around words like ‘treason’ anymore. And he was all squishy about

what Athena had gone through. He'd told her he would have been in line right behind her father to hurt that bastard if he'd known. The whole club would have been there.

The issue was that they'd gone behind the club, not what they'd done while they were back there.

So here Sam was, packed into a booth at Hal's with the four patches he was closest to in age—the table really was starting to split in half between the old dudes and the young guns—trying to talk about the Big News in the club without saying anything Athena wouldn't want him to say.

“I can't believe we were nice to that fucker,” Jay said, leaving off his bullshit attempts to joke around. “Such a pretty-boy shithead, so many chances to fuck him up, and we hung out with him.”

“Not that much,” Chris countered. “He didn't like us much.” He smirked at Sam. “And he fuckin' hated you.”

“Likewise,” Sam said. “And I think here's where we should change the subject.” They were sitting in the middle of a diner, getting too close to things that should not be said in public.

Monty jumped in right away with a change. His mouth full of meatball sub, he said, “What's the latest word on Gun? Anybody know?”

Gun was Sam's actual blood uncle, so he knew. Mom and Leah took turns daily at the hospital, and he and Mason went in together at least twice a week. “If all goes well, he's had his last surgery for a while. Once he heals up from this last one enough, they'll get back to therapy.”

“They put one of those bags in, right?” Duncan asked. His old man, Maverick, was Gunner's best friend, so the Helms were keeping informed as well.

“Colostomy, yeah.”

“That *sucks*,” Jay said.

“It does.” And Gun would agree. He was extremely unhappy about that kind of business happening in bags, but he

had no control or feeling at all from his waist down. The details were gross and depressing, and Gun wouldn't like everybody talking about it, so Sam didn't say anything more.

"Is he getting anything back in his legs at all?" Chris asked.

"Not yet. The doc says probably not ever."

"*Damn,*" Monty muttered. I can't get my head around Gun like this. Dude's legs were *never* still. Even when I see him, it's like I can't really see him. Probably sounds nuts."

"No, I get it," Sam said. "I think Gun feels something like it himself. Like he doesn't know who he is without working legs, or being able to ride." He sighed and pushed his plate away. "This is all hard as fuck."

Duncan leaned back, too. "Our dads'll get that trike done and get him back on the road. Once he gets right with that idea." Sam's dad, Maverick, Apollo, and Rad were working together on a custom-build trike with mods so that Gun could still ride.

Jay shook his head. "My dad says Gun told him to shove that bike up his ass, so he's a long way to right with the idea."

"He'll get there," Duncan said. Duncan was easily the most laid-back of the group and could be counted on to find the brightest view of most situations. "It's like your old man, Jay. Rad fought the trike hard at first. I remember how salty he was back when he retired. But that trike's why he still rides. Gun'll see that eventually. Right now, he's still healing from the shooting and everything it did to his insides. It hasn't even been two months yet."

The server came up to their table. She focused like a laser on Monty and gave him a flirty grin. "Hey boys, how's everything over here? Y'all need refills? Maybe some pie? We got apple, pecan, and pumpkin chiffon."

Jay and Monty looked like they were about to entertain the idea of dessert, but Sam wanted to get to the hospital and get back home. He'd promised his mom he would help Mason get the last of the winter's hay into the loft this afternoon, and he

had to do a load of laundry so he had clean underwear for his trip with Athena.

“No, I think we’re good,” he got in first. “Just the check’ll do.”

Jay and Monty both gave him a sad-puppy look, but they didn’t push the idea of pie.

The server—her name tag read *Lainey*—tore their check off her pad and leaned down a lot more than necessary as she set the check next to Monty’s plate. “There ya go, boys. You have a good day, now.” She winked at Monty and turned away, rocking a cute pair of hips like a runway model.

She was pretty cute all around.

Monty grinned and showed the check around. Lainey had written her number on it. “Even when I don’t cast a line, I pull a catch,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck off, Michael B. Jordan,” Duncan said, laughing.

~oOo~

“Fuck off!” Gun roared. “Get out!” He grabbed the puke-yellow plastic water pitcher off his over-bed table and heaved it toward the door, where the Young Guns were clustered. The throw wasn’t powerful enough to reach them, but when the pitcher hit the floor, the top came off and water splashed them.

They hadn’t even managed to get all the way into the room. As soon as Gunner saw them, he’d started shouting. Nothing wrong with his voice.

“Uncle Gun,” Sam started. He’d visited regularly since Gunner had been shot, and he’d seen his uncle depressed, in serious pain, doped up, tired, resigned, and once or twice even almost his old self. He’d seen him pissed off a few times, too. But he’d never seen him fully losing his shit like this. Hostile to people who loved him.

“I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!” Gun roared again before Sam got more out than his name.

A hand landed on Sam’s shoulder. “Let’s go, bruh,” Jay said at his ear. “Today is not the day.”

Aunt Leah was in the room too, focused on Gun, trying to calm him down. Sam felt like he should help her, like he couldn’t leave her to deal with this on her own. Gun had been hurt saving his life. He had to do what he could to help.

But Jay was pulling on his shoulder. “We gotta leave him be, Sam. C’mon.”

Leah looked over and met Sam’s gaze. When she nodded and mouthed *Go*, he backed off and followed the others out.

He really hoped Duncan was right, and Gun would come to terms with the turn his life had taken.

And remember how many people had his back.

~oOo~

Sam picked Athena up the next morning. Both her parents were there, and they sent her off like she was leaving to live abroad with no plans to return rather than driving up to a neighboring state for a couple nights.

Eventually they were able to climb into his truck with Blanche between them and head north. Athena wasn’t much interested in communicating, and shortly after Sam pulled onto the interstate, she settled in against the passenger window and went to sleep. Blanche slept with her head in Athena’s lap for about an hour, then woke and resituated herself to get pets from the awake person in the car, tucking her head under Sam’s arm and giving him the sad eyes. Sam was happy to oblige.

He drove more or less on autopilot, letting his brain rifle through its shelves. He thought about Gunner, and the fight in Laughlin that took his legs. His memories of that night were simultaneously fuzzy and powerful, and the thing that fucked

him up most was how quickly everything had turned bad. He'd been hanging out on his guard shift, then he'd been heading to bed. His big concern had been Monty's horrible flatulence. A few minutes later, everything had been chaos. Noise and blood, danger and pain. All because someone they'd thought was one of them had very much not been.

Strange how the fear happened mostly in retrospect.

He'd been scared in the moment, too, but his brain hadn't focused there. Instead, he'd been intent on figuring things out, keeping safe, making sure his people were safe, working on getting out of the trouble. It wasn't until well afterward, when he was in the hospital, that the fear had turned his stomach and made his limbs shake.

But it *had* turned his stomach and made his limbs shake. While he was in the hospital healing from being shot, he'd worried that he wasn't cut out to be a Bull—and he'd wondered whether he'd made a mistake seeking it at all. He'd talked to his father about it, and Dad had assured him that most of them felt fear when they were in the shit. The thing was to stay sharp despite it, which Sam had done. Apparently it was okay to lose his shit after the fact.

He'd been patched while he was still sort of losing his shit, and honestly not entirely sure he still wanted it, but then he'd had the patch. Never would he admit it to anyone, but he'd felt trapped at first.

Not until the night Hunter was killed did Sam feel like his kutte sat right on his shoulders.

Maybe that was fucked up, to finally feel like a true patch on the night he and four other patches helped Athena kill her rapist. Sam hadn't even done much that night. He hadn't touched Hunter; his focus had been on no one but Athena. Still, that was the night he'd felt like he'd truly understood what being a Bull meant, and understood that he wanted what it meant. He wanted to be a man like his father, his uncles. He wanted to be able to truly protect those he loved and, when he couldn't, to know that justice would always be served.

He'd known that night that he'd been right to prospect. He felt undiluted pride with that patch on his back now.

~oOo~

Athena woke when Sam made a pit stop, fifty miles or so into Kansas. While she took Blanche to a dirt patch off to the side of the gas station, Sam filled the tank and went in to drain his own pipe. Before he paid, he grabbed a soda for each of them, a little pack of Snausages for the pup, and some snacks.

When he returned to the truck, his girls were settled inside again. He handed Athena a Cherry Coke, a Reese's, and Blanche's snacks, too.

"Thanks," Athena signed.

"You're welcome. Did you get good sleep?"

She nodded. "I'm going to hit the toilet, too. Is it inside?"

"Yep. It's locked, though, and you need to ask for a key. I'll go in with you."

She grabbed his arm before he could reach for the door handle. "I got it. Stay with Blanche." She shoved her door open and jumped down without waiting for his response.

Sam watched her walk toward the shop. It felt like she was making distance between them, and he wanted to be worried about that. But maybe it wasn't about him. Probably it wasn't about him. Maybe she was simply scared.

Athena hated to be scared. She hated anything that made her feel weak.

What they did on this little road trip was the last step in eradicating from the world all traces of Hunter Cruz and what he'd done. That was a good thing, and she insisted that she didn't care about what she called the 'uterus blob' and couldn't wait for it to be gone. Sam believed her, and he was glad she felt that way. But she was about to have an abortion. Even without any moral qualms about it, even knowing it was

the right thing, even hating that there was anything inside her that didn't belong there, it had to be scary.

She'd read—and asked him to read—a bunch of stuff online about the procedure and what came before and after it, but it was still something she'd never done before and had no experience with. It was still a big, scary thing, coming on the heels of an even worse thing.

She had to be scared. She hated to be scared.

Sam wished there was something he could do to make all this easier, but it was going to be big and hard and scary, no matter what.

All he could do was be there when she needed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Athena woke with Blanche's paw on her forearm. When her vision could focus, she saw that her dog was alerting her to something at the window—a window she didn't recognize. Because they were in a motel in Overland Park.

She sat up and looked around, getting her bearings. Heavy drapes were drawn across the window. Blanche was still alerting, but Sam wasn't in the room ... and the bathroom door was open, showing an unlit room, so he literally was not in the room at all. Huh. That was weird and unsettling. She'd think that through after she figured out what was going on outside.

This was an old-fashioned motel, the kind where all the room doors opened to the outside. They were on the second floor, but that didn't make her feel any better about opening the door to see what had her dog's interest.

Slipping from the bed—ugh, instantly nauseated, of course—she grabbed Sam's flannel off the back of the desk chair and pulled it on. It fell to her knees and served perfectly well as a robe. First she went to the door; the deadbolt was engaged, but the security chain dangled. She slipped that into its groove. Sam would just have to knock when he came back from wherever he'd gone. The peephole was so high that even on tiptoe she couldn't look straight through it. All she saw was sky.

Blanche was still determined to get Athena to notice something at the window. Stepping into her Docs, just in case she had need of fight or flight, Athena sidled up to an edge of the drapes and lifted it carefully, only enough that she could see the walkway outside it.

Three men, maybe in their thirties, were leaning against the railing, talking and drinking tallboys.

They seemed harmless enough. Drinking beer at—she glanced at the digital clock on the desk—seven o'clock in the morning suggested maybe they should take their confab to the nearest AA meeting, but they didn't look like they had

anything more nefarious than a morning drunk on their agenda.

She signed to Blanche that it was okay and glanced once more through her narrow portal, double checking that they were just three aimless loser types. Before she dropped the edge of the drape, Sam stepped onto the walkway from the steps. He had a tray with two to-go coffee cups in one hand and a white paper sack in the other. He was wearing his kutte.

Those three men, all of them at least a decade older than him, and at least one looking like he could handle himself in a fight, pulled up tight against the railing, clearing the way for a twenty-two-year-old Brazen Bull who obviously was not looking for a fight.

She thought those guys even lowered their eyes, as if they weren't worthy of meeting Sam head-on.

She'd seen it countless times in her life, the way that leather, its patch, was like a shield, or more like a crown. It said, *I have power over you*. Some reacted to that meaning with deference, some with suspicion, some with violence. A few responded in friendship. But *everybody* reacted to it. The Brazen Bulls patch meant something.

Sam passed the men, said a word or two (she thought it was 'Morning, fellas') and stopped at the door to their room. Athena dropped the drape and hurried back to the door to release the security chain again. She just managed to back away from the door so it didn't bang into her when he opened it.

He had the sack in his mouth, the key (an actual key) in one hand and the coffee in his other, but he managed to convey with only his eyes his surprise to see her right there.

She took the sack from him, and he closed the door.

"You left while I was asleep," she told him after she set the bag down.

He put the coffee beside it. "Sorry. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stay still, either, and I didn't want to bother your sleep, so I went outside. Then I thought I'd pick up some

coffee and doughnuts. There was a pharmacy nearby, so I got online and found a list of things you'll need and went in to get you stuff.

“Things I'll need?” As understanding dawned, Athena grinned. “Samwise, did you buy me maxi-pads?” She'd bought herself some and had them in her pack, but she still loved him *so much* for thinking of it. And buying some! What a cutie he was.

“Maxi-pads and things called ‘panty liners,’ and ibuprofen. I also got a wrap-around heating pad. Two, actually. One that plugs in and one you microwave. I thought the microwave one could work in the truck. For a while, at least. I also bought a big bag of peanut-butter cups and a twelve-pack of Cherry Coke. It's all still in the truck. I ran out of hands.”

She jumped at him and wrapped her arms around his waist. His arms came around her, and he bent over to kiss the top of her head.

Athena's feelings about this day were too complicated to fully identify. She was nervous, because she'd never had an abortion before and, though she'd read all the info Planned Parenthood had sent her when she'd made her appointment, she wouldn't really know what it was like until she'd experienced it. In her research she'd come across some scary stories about abortions with ‘complications,’ and despite knowing how statistically minute that possibility was, she couldn't eradicate the stories from her mind. Also, she wanted a medication abortion, but by the time she'd been able to get an appointment, she was about ten weeks pregnant. (They counted from the start of her last period, which seemed stupid; since obviously she hadn't been pregnant then, and also she knew exactly when she had been.) Though she wasn't showing yet, ten weeks was very close to the upper limit for medication abortion, and the doctor she'd emailed with had told her to be prepared to have a surgical abortion instead, and they'd make that call together at the appointment.

Athena had had a lot of surgeries as a child, and even more procedures. While she was in one way an old pro at them, in another way, the words ‘surgical’ and ‘procedure’ and

‘surgical procedure’ did weird things to her blood pressure. So yes, she was nervous.

But she was also relieved to finally be done with the last of the things Hunter had done to her that night in the cabin. Her relief was so keen it was basically excitement. When she was back home, it would all finally be over. No rapist asshole, no nasty bite mark, no uterus blob, no more need to think of that fucker ever again in her life.

Like it had never happened.

She stepped back from their hug. Sam peered down at her and asked, “How’re you doing?”

“I’m good,” she told him and meant it. “But I can’t have that coffee or doughnuts. Nothing by mouth but water until after.”

“Fuck. Forgot about that.” He looked over at the tray and the sack. The sack had Blanche’s full attention. She sat and stared at it like it might come to life and leap into her mouth.

“Okay,” Sam signed. “We’ll leave the doughnuts for later, and we’ll pick up fresh coffee when you can have it. The clinic is about a ten-minute drive from here, so we should leave around quarter-to. Agree?”

“Sounds good. I’m going to jump in the shower.”

He nodded, then caught her hand and squeezed it. When she met his eyes again, he didn’t sign a word. He simply stared into her. She understood what he wanted to tell her.

“I love you, too,” she signed. “I’m okay.”

~oOo~

The clinic in Overland Park was even nicer than the photos in their materials had suggested. It was bright and cheerily decorated, and looked simply like a medical office. Athena was scheduled first thing in the morning, so there weren’t

many patients in the large waiting area, but those who'd entered with her were just normal women.

Obviously they were. Athena had not one day ever in her life thought that abortion was shameful or sinful or anything but healthcare. She'd gone from not knowing what the word 'abortion' meant to being taught about reproductive rights by her mother. But the weird way people talked about it, especially media types and politicians, made it seem like this big, scary, shadowy thing, and she guessed some of that weirdness had seeped unbidden into her consciousness, because she was actually surprised, and relieved, to find herself in a totally normal medical office, surrounded by totally normal people—who might not have been at the clinic for an abortion at all. Planned Parenthood was a complete women's clinic and provided all kinds of care and services, from routine wellness appointments to cancer screenings.

Not remotely normal was the little band of judgmental freaks outside, berating women as they approached the building. But Athena hadn't been surprised about them; they were notorious. She couldn't hear their shouts, of course, but she could see them shouting and waving signs with nasty words and lying images. Some put so much effort into their volume and anger they were red in the face, and the morning was just beginning.

Walking to the clinic with Sam's strong arm around her and his patch on his back had diverted most of their bullshit away from her. Fucking cowards as well as lunatic assholes.

A few men and women wearing bright pink safety vests with the word ESCORT on the back were there, creating a safe cordon for the patients and their support person, if they had one, to get to the clinic.

Athena had Sam, but at the last minute, she'd decided to leave Blanche in the motel room. Obviously she'd informed the clinic that she was deaf, and that she had a service dog and was bringing her boyfriend, who could interpret for her. They'd told her that they would have a female interpreter available for her, in case she decided she wanted privacy, and that there was no problem at all with keeping Blanche with her

for a medication abortion, but they would need to take some special steps to have a dog in the room for a surgical procedure. They couldn't bar Blanche from staying with her virtually anywhere, but it would take some time to set up.

Athena had planned to keep Blanche with her no matter what. In addition to possibly needing her dog to help her, she was trying to be better about letting her do her job all the time. Also, she might need her buddy.

Though he hadn't said it outright, she knew that Sam wanted to stay with her the whole time, too, and it looked like the clinic would allow that as well. She wasn't sure about it. She wanted his support, but something about him being there while they removed the blob Hunter had left behind felt wrong. She hadn't talked to him about it because she didn't understand it herself.

Then this morning she'd decided not to bring Blanche. If she needed a procedure instead of some pills, she didn't want to overburden the staff. That made keeping Sam with her feel a lot more necessary.

"It's completely fucking bananas that those jerks are attacking women going to a medical clinic!" Athena signed after they got into the clinic and verified with the man at the door that she had an appointment.

"It was all I could do not to go for the moron in the tie-dye," Sam replied. "I am so glad you couldn't hear the shit out of that infected hemorrhoid's mouth."

That man had been the reddest face, shouting so forcefully he'd been spitting. "He looked like he was going to stroke out."

"Shame he didn't."

They were at the large, curved front desk, which was decorated with black and orange crepe paper and cardboard ghosts, black cats, and pumpkins. The women sitting before them smiled at Athena and spoke, "Hello. Welcome to Planned Parenthood. May I have your name?"

Sam signed those words, then waited for Athena to answer in sign her reply. He interpreted for her, signing and speaking for himself as well. In that way, Athena was able to explain that she had not brought her dog, and that yes, she wanted Sam to stay with her, so she didn't need their interpreter. The receptionist explained that the interpreter would remain available, as there were some instances in which the doctor would need to talk to Athena completely privately. And also if at any point Sam needed to step out or Athena needed him to do so.

The best thing? The receptionist talked to Athena, not Sam, the whole time, even though Sam was interpreting. Often, a hearing person who didn't know ASL focused on the interpreter, not the Deaf person they were supposed to be communicating with, but this woman either had some experience communicating this way or was simply empathetic enough to know where her attention should be. Sam knew how to position himself so Athena could see his signs and still give attention to the speaker.

When the basics were handled, including the payment, the receptionist handed Athena a clipboard with a form on it, asked her to look it over and add any remaining information, and sent them off to the waiting area.

“How're you doing?” Sam asked when they sat.

“I'm good. No worries.”

Occasionally, Athena almost wanted to ask him if he *wanted* her to be upset, since he asked annoyingly often if she was, but she understood the pettiness of that impulse. He didn't want her to be upset; he wanted to be ready if she was.

~oOo~

“If you want to see, you can,” the doctor told her. “It's completely up to you.”

Athena shook her head as soon as Sam finished signing. “Nothing to see,” she signed, and Sam spoke.

After the doctor, a ‘patient advocate,’ and an interpreter had shooed Sam from the first examining room so they could ask Athena several pointed questions about whether she was safe, whether the decision to abort was her own, whether she had made arrangements for aftercare, and so on, they’d treated him like an ally. They’d been a bit wary of him before that interview.

The doctor had the sonogram monitor turned so all Athena could see was a side and most of the back. Sam sat on the other side of the examining table, holding her arm because she’d wriggled her hand free of his tense grip. There was no room for him on the doctor’s side of the table, so Athena had to swing back and forth to both make eye contact with the doctor and see what she was saying. She was not about to try to read lips now. This was too important to allow any possible misunderstanding.

Her belly was coated with some slimy goo and she’d just been sort of beat up by the sonogram doohickey. The doctor had pressed hard, looking for a good image. But at least it wasn’t one of those transvaginal ultrasounds. That sounded like rape all over again.

Sam started signing again. “According to your last menstrual cycle, you’re ten weeks and three days. That’s consistent with this scan.”

The doctor handed Athena a wad of tissues. Then Sam signed for her again.

“You’re technically within the range for medication, but that approach becomes slightly less effective at the later end of the range. It’s possible that you’ll need a third dose to complete the process. That would mean a third day to be going through the process.”

“Would the surgery be any different from the way you described it before?” she asked.

“No. You’re right in the middle of the range for a D&C. It takes longer today, and we’d still want you to stay close for the rest of the day, but you wouldn’t have to come back, except in

the rare event of a complication. It's entirely up to you, Athena."

Stupidly, Athena looked to Sam. Like he had the right answer—or any right to answer.

He only stared back, looking concerned but not inclined to provide an answer.

A surgical procedure scared her. Surgery hurt. She could take some pain, but that didn't mean pain didn't hurt. And she was just totally over this whole infuriating mess. Even from the grave, Hunter was hurting her.

But going through three days of appointments and medications and not being sure it was working sounded awful. That would probably hurt worse.

"Will it hurt?"

Sam flinched subtly before he gave that question sound. And he peered deeply into her eyes as he gave her the doctor's answer. "Both options are uncomfortable after you leave here. The medication a bit more. In either case, you'll bleed and cramp for several days, up to about two weeks. Until the tissue is purged, the medication option will make heavier cramping. The D&C option, women have varying experiences with the procedure itself. Most feel some pinching and cramping, and that's it. Some feel almost nothing. For others, it's fairly uncomfortable. Since you have Sam with you, we can give you some anesthesia, if you'd like. Something to put you into twilight sleep."

Again, Athena shook her head at once. "I don't want to be doopey. I can handle cramps." She'd been imagining *surgical* pain. Like waking up with a zipper of stitches across her belly, for instance. She'd been a little kid then, but she remembered how intense the pain had been, and how totally unable to process it she'd been. The word 'surgical' freaked her the fuck out.

But that was the right call here, wasn't it? It would be done today. No more blob *today*. Nothing left to deal with but a long, messy period. The final end of Hunter Cruz.

Fuck fear. She wanted this over. “I’ll do the surgical procedure.”

Sam frowned at her as he voiced her decision. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“I fucking said it, didn’t I?” she snapped in sign—and then immediately regretted it. “Sorry. That was bitchy.”

He smiled. “I love you, Frosie. Be as bitchy to me as you want. I got you.”

~oOo~

Sam parked in the same spot he’d vacated hours ago, facing their room on the floor above. “Sit tight and let me come around and get you. Please.”

Athena nodded. The procedure had hurt, but not horribly. A few hard pinches and pokes, some cramping, a few weirdly unidentifiable sensations. It hadn’t taken long. Maybe twenty minutes? She wasn’t sure. Time had been wonky for her all day.

Now she felt crampy and generally sore and tired, but it wasn’t awful. It mostly felt like the first day of her period, when she was bloated and tender and could feel the monster of Day Two clawing its way forward. Day Two always sucked, but like virtually all women, she was capable of conducting her normal life around that suckage.

She could have climbed out of the truck on her own; she was perfectly capable of walking unassisted and had no physical need of Sam’s help and attention.

But something was going wrong in her head.

She should have felt relieved and happy. It was over! The last vestige of what Hunter had done to her two fucking months ago was finally gone. She’d been excited to get to the clinic this morning, ready for the procedure, ready to get on with her life.

Now, she felt ... wrong. Sad, or something. But not because of the abortion. She didn't regret it, hadn't suddenly developed an idea that the blob was anything more than a blob yet. That wasn't it.

She was glad it was gone. She was not in an unbearable amount of pain. What the *fuck* was wrong with her?

The passenger door opened, and Sam stood there, looking intent and worried and ready to be everything she needed.

She wished they'd sorted out their feelings so much earlier than this. A while back, she'd told him she was glad their relationship hadn't changed before now, because they had enough experience to really know how special their love was.

What a load of stupid that was!

They would have known at any point how special they were together—they'd *always* been special together. If they hadn't been so determined to think of it as incest, maybe they would have seen the truth before Sam had gone through a heartbreaking and frustrating series of doomed relationships, and before Athena had met Hunter. She wouldn't have gotten jerked around for years and acted like a doormat because she was so sure he was the best catch she could find in the Deaf community, or even the ASL community. He had *never* been the best catch. The best fucking catch in the ASL community had been her best friend! And Hunter had been a shitty boyfriend *before* he'd raped her.

God, she was so stupid! So fucking *STUPID!*

Her self-directed fury was so acute and hot, had risen up so fast, it needed release. Athena's hand flew up unbidden, and she punched herself in the head.

She was going for a second strike when Sam's hand caught her fist. She looked over and found him frowning deeply, his eyes alight with worry and confusion. He shook his head.

She loved him so much. The awful, incomprehensible shit churning up her chest hurt, it hurt *so bad*, but Sam was there. Right there. Protecting her, even from herself.

He had *always* been there.

He still had her hand, but she needed only one to make the sign she needed to make.

“Sam?”

Tears surged forth before she could take a breath. Once they were free, they were a deluge, like a crack in a dam suddenly breaking wide. Where they’d come from, what they meant, she wasn’t sure. A vast, overwhelming flood of bleakness rolled over her.

“Sam!” she signed again.

He gathered her up in his arms like a baby. As soon as he had her, she wrapped her arms as tightly around his neck as she could, buried her face against his chest, and sobbed.

He held her tightly and carried her to their room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sam's phone alerted a text. He was waiting for it and got the message he expected: *Here with your order. Where is your room?*

Second floor, he replied. 210.

Got it. On my way up.

Moving carefully, Sam slipped his arm from under Athena's sleeping head and tried to shift the pillows to make up for the space his arm had left. As he stood, she made the stunted sound that was her unconscious moan and drew the covers up tight under her chin.

She had cried herself to sleep in his arms—and freaked Sam out completely in the process. Never before in his life had he seen Athena cry like she had this afternoon: great, heaving sobs, fat tears, drool and snot, all of it. Mostly unvoiced, but still dramatic and heartbreaking.

Repeatedly she'd tried to stop and failed, and then apologized and cried harder. The whole thing had gone on for at least fifteen or twenty minutes, until she'd simply worn herself out. For the past hour or so, he'd sat up in the motel bed with her half on him and half off, sleeping under his arm.

Blanche sat up and focused on the door, and two seconds later, just as Sam got to it, there was a hard knock.

He opened the door. "Hey."

The delivery guy smiled. "Hi. Order from Spin Pizza?"

"That's us, yep." He took the pizza and the bag of extras. "Thanks, bruh."

"No prob. Have a good night."

"You, too."

His arms full, Sam kicked the door closed. He had Blanche's dedicated interest as he cleared a place on the cheap desk and set everything down. "We'll have to talk later about

whether you get scraps. But I'll make you a nice bowl of kibble now. How's that sound?"

The dog sniffed lovingly at the pizza box. Kibble apparently did not sound like a great idea at this time.

Too bad. Sam turned to grab Blanche's bowl from the floor—and discovered Athena sitting up in bed, looking ruffled and swollen and bleary-eyed. And absolutely beautiful.

"Sorry I woke you," he signed when she blinked at him. "I ordered pizza for dinner and it just came. How do you feel?"

He watched her do a systems check. "Crampy," she answered. "But not awful. My eyes are sore. I'm sorry I was such a baby about it all."

"Stop," he told her and sat on the bed to face her. "You're not a baby. I totally understand why you'd need to let all that out."

Her brow wrinkled up. "You do? Could you explain it to me? Because I don't know what my problem is. I should be jumping for joy, and instead I feel ... I don't even know."

She'd dropped her head as she finished signing. Sam lifted her chin so she looked at him. "Athena. Babe. I want you to take this like I mean it, okay?"

Still frowning, she nodded slowly. Warily.

"It's trauma," he told her.

Her head shook wildly. "No it is *not*. I'm not traumatized by any of it. Just pissed off. And anyway, even if I was, it's *over*. If I was going to puke tears all over everything, I should have done it up at the cabin, when it was fresh."

Maybe she'd forgotten (or erased) that she had cried up at the cabin, while they'd sat together at the end of the dock. Sam didn't remind her; that wasn't important. He had been thinking about this very thing while she'd slept. For real, he'd been thinking about this very thing for *weeks*.

"You know," he began, "in Laughlin, when all that shit went down, I don't think I was scared in the moment. I mean, my heart was definitely racing, and I was definitely thinking

‘Oh shit, oh shit,’ but I wasn’t actively scared. I was focused on figuring out the trouble and finding a way out of it.”

Nodding impatiently, she signed. “I know. You told me.”

“I’m not done. Remember how I also told you that when I woke up in the hospital, that was when I started shaking and freaking out? That was when all the feelings really hit me. When it was over, and I was safe.”

“Not safe. You almost *died*, Sam. If you’re trying to say that’s the same as this, you’re wrong. What Hunter did was shitty, but I didn’t almost die. I barely got hurt.”

“Not true—about the hurting, I mean. He hurt you bad, Frosie. Not just physically. I’ve seen it every day since. He hurt you, and he scared you. Maybe worst of all, he shook your trust in yourself. That’s why you’ve been so angry. He *traumatized* you.”

For a moment, she glared at him, so furiously he almost backed away from the point he’d just made. Then she tossed the covers away and scooted off the bed. Without another look at him or any sign, she stomped to the bathroom and slammed the door.

“Welp,” he said to Blanche. “I fucked that up.”

She was in there a long time. While she was, Sam filled Blanche’s bowl with kibble, then worked on turning the little table and two narrow armchairs by the window into a dinner table, laying out two of the Styrofoam plates the restaurant had provided, and paper napkins, packets of parmesan and red pepper, cans of Cherry Coke. He laid out a piece of sausage and peppers on Athena’s plate and two pieces of pepperoni and mushrooms from his side of the pizza on his plate.

Then he sat and waited.

Maybe fifteen minutes after she slammed the door, she opened it. At first, she stood in the doorway with her arms crossed and stared at him. There was no fury in her expression now. Sam couldn’t read her feelings. That was a rare occurrence, Athena being opaque to him.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She hated that question, but he didn’t know another way to ask.

This time, though, her answer surprised him. “I don’t know.”

He stood at once and went to her. When he offered his arms, she stepped in and let him fold her up tightly. She began to cry again almost right away—and when she did, she pushed away from him.

Sam let her have the distance she needed.

“I hate that I can’t fucking stop these stupid tears!” she signed with a furious flourish. “What the actual FUCK!!!!” She stomped her feet in a storming rush, stopping abruptly and putting her hands to her belly.

Sam went to her and ducked down to catch her eye. “You hurt. Do you need meds?”

Shaking her head, she slapped her tears away. “I’m so fucking stupid.”

“You are not!”

“Oh come on. I know you’ve thought it. You hated Hunter.”

“I didn’t hate him. Not until the end.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn’t like him, but it wasn’t hate. I hated the way he treated you sometimes.”

“Which I put up with. Which makes me fucking stupid and left me open to what he did.”

He wanted to tell her to stop tearing herself down, and *Jesus fuck* not to start blaming herself for what that shithead had done to her. But it was occurring to him that she needed to go through this. Still convinced what was happening to her right now was like what had happened to him in Laughlin, he thought she’d been shoving all these bad feelings down, under the cover of her rage, because she couldn’t afford to face them. Not until now, when the whole ordeal was really over.

Nothing left but the healing. And healing fucking hurt.

Instead of telling her what she should or should not feel or think, Sam told her what *he* felt and thought. He took her hand lightly. When he tugged to draw her to him, she came. When she looked up at him—god, her eyes showed how *weary* she was—he signed, “I love you, Athena. I think you are brilliant and fascinating and strong. So fucking strong. And tough as nails. For my whole life, you’ve been a part of me I need in order to live. Tell me what you need, what you want. I will do anything.”

She studied his face for a moment, then dropped her head and stared instead at the floor. When she signed again, her eyes rose no higher than his chest. “I don’t want to be traumatized. Then it’s like he’s still hurting me.”

Sam’s ribs seemed to clench like a fist around his heart. Fuck, he wished he’d put some hurt on the raping bastard himself.

Gently, he lifted her chin. Her beautiful, exhausted brown eyes broke his heart. “Let yourself heal, babe. You have to clean the wound before it can heal.”

Finally, she took a deep, shaking breath, so big it spread her shoulders, and let her head drop to rest on his chest. He put his arms around her and held on.

They stood like that for a while, until Athena, without lifting her head, signed “Pizza?” and Sam laughed. When his chest shook with it, she lifted her head and gave him an equivocal smile. Physical and emotional fatigue was still all over her face, but he could see a refreshed calm filling her up as well.

He knew what was happening inside her: she was making room for these feelings that hurt but were unavoidable. She was acknowledging her trauma and starting to reckon with it. Because she was tough as nails and could overcome anything anybody threw in her way.

“I’m starving,” she told him. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

He turned and indicated the table with a little flourish. “Your favorite. There’s also chocolate chip cookies for dessert.”

~oOo~

Once Athena got the all-clear from the clinic the next day, they headed home.

Since their talk after the pizza was delivered, she’d seemed better. Still introspective and a little distracted, but no longer freaking out. Sam thought finally recognizing, or acknowledging, that Hunter had really hurt her, the kind of hurt that made trauma, had helped her understand her toxic concoction of emotions. No doubt she was still feeling that concoction—trauma wasn’t something that just stopped with a snap of the fingers—but knowing it for what it was had calmed her.

Physically, she seemed okay. She’d described it as like her heavy period days, and Sam knew understood what that meant. Her biggest complaint was that ‘pads feel gross.’

They stopped at the same gas station they’d hit on the way up. While Sam filled the tank, Athena went in to use the bathroom. When the tank was full, before he went in to pay and grab a Coke or something, he took Blanche over to the grassy area and let her have a few sniffs and stretch her legs a little, in addition to getting her business done.

Athena was still inside, so he locked Blanche in the cab and went in himself. He could stand to get some business done, too.

He got the men’s room key from the chick at the desk and told her what pump he was on—and that he was probably going to add to his bill with some snackage supplies. As he turned, Athena was right behind him. She had her phone out like she meant to give it to him, and her expression was ... weird. Surprised or something.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Did you get a text?”

If he had, he hadn't felt it. He dug into his pocket and pulled it free. “No texts since this morning. What's up?”

Now she did hand him her phone. A message from her mother took up center stage: *Not sure if this is weird news for you right now, but Kelsey's in labor. We're all headed to the hospital. We might still be there when you get back in town. Don't feel like you have to be there. Everybody will understand, starlight. I just wanted to warn you.*

Her mom had texted her about five minutes earlier. Sam checked his phone again, but nope. Nobody had sent him word yet. That wasn't particularly weird; the women in the family were a lot more on top of that shit than the guys, and the women generally turned to other women to spread news in the family.

Sam handed the phone back. “I thought she was due the week before Thanksgiving.”

“The kid hasn't learned about calendars yet, dummy.”

He liked the sass in that response. “How do you feel about it?”

Athena wasn't sure she wanted to be a mom, but she loved kids. Her ambivalence toward having her own was based in worries about whether she'd be a good Deaf mom, and whether she was too small to successfully get a baby born. She'd been told by more than one doctor that any pregnancy she had (and kept) would be high risk, and she was the product of an extremely high risk pregnancy in which many of the risks had been realized, so ... she was ambivalent. But it had nothing to do with her feelings about children.

She shrugged. “I'm okay. Whatever weird shit is going around in my head right now, none of it is about having an abortion. That is nothing but good. Kelsey having a baby is completely different from the infection Hunter left behind.”

“Okay. Good. We're about two hours out. Do you want to head for home, or to the hospital, or make that a game-time decision?”

She smiled, and Sam was sure it was her first undiluted smile of the day. “Your sports metaphors are dumb. FYI. I think I want to go to the hospital, but I reserve the right to change my mind.”

“Game-time decision it is,” he signed, laughing. She grinned and flipped him off.

“Did you leave Blanche alone in the truck?” she asked.

“Yeah.” When she frowned at him like a schoolteacher handing out detentions, he defended himself. “It’s forty degrees, so it’s not like she’s going to boil in there. I took her for a pee first, and I locked up. Here, take the keys.”

She took the keys, then waggled her finger at him. “Neglectful dog dad.”

“Yeah, yeah, alert the authorities. I’m gonna take a shit. Do you want snacks?”

“Are you offering your shit as a snack, Samwise?”

It did his heart good to see banter from her—and it suddenly registered that it had been weeks since she’d been playful like this.

“I’ll have you know my shit is considered a delicacy in certain circles,” he said, keeping up the game.

She made a broadly comic ‘yuck’ face. Yeah, his girl was going to be just fine. “I am not in those circles, trust me. Flush and wash your hands. Then, and only then, I’ll take a hot chocolate. I’ve still got my bag of Reese’s for snacking.”

Before she turned toward the front door, Sam grabbed her and kissed the shit right out of her.

~oOo~

When they got to Tulsa, Athena still wanted to go to the hospital. Sam headed to Tulsa County, which was the go-to for the Bulls, as Willa had worked there for decades. She was head of nursing now, but she’d started off as a Labor &

Delivery nurse and was almost always in the room for family births.

When Sam, Athena, and Blanche arrived in the L&D waiting room, their family had the place packed, as usual. Sam always felt kind of bad for any woman having a kid at the same time a Bulls old lady was pushing one out. Though the room was big enough that there technically were more chairs than the Bulls needed, they were a big and rowdy bunch, not to mention intimidating to the normies, so they pretty much always had the whole room to themselves.

Probably the most intimidating person in the waiting room was not wearing a kutte. Little Tildy, Kelsey and Dex's two-year-old daughter, was wearing a black hoodie with little cat ears on the hood and charging at people while screaming "MEOW!" with every decibel she could reach, like a baby kaiju.

When Athena saw her mom and dad and started to move away from him, he caught her arm without thinking. He'd seen something else going on behind Tildy, and wanted to point it out. She gave him an irritated look, and so did Jacinda—and then it occurred to him that there was a good reason those two women would want to reconnect at once. Whoops.

Since he had her attention, he nodded toward the far corner of the room. "Look."

She looked, and her irritation faded away. "Wow. That's awesome!"

Sam nodded. Gunner was in the waiting room with the family.

He was in a wheelchair, which had an IV pole with two different bags on it and electronic controller gizmos for both; he was wearing two hospital gowns, one as a robe, and had one of those useless waffle-weave hospital blankets over his legs; and he was pale and skinny—those legs were already shockingly thin, his knees sticking out like strange rocks—but it was still great to see him here. With family, part of a celebration.

The last time Sam had seen Gun, he'd thrown a water pitcher at him.

"I'm going to go say hi," Sam said.

"I'll be there in a minute," Athena replied. "I need to talk to my folks."

Sam kissed her cheek, and they split up.

Mom, Mason, Aunt Leah, and Larissa were sitting with Gun. When she saw him coming, Mom stood and met him halfway. "Hey. How'd everything go?"

"Good. Smooth." That was as accurate a report as Sam had any business sharing.

"She feels okay?"

"Yeah. She says it feels like a bad day of her period."

Mom nodded like she knew what he was talking about. Also not his business. Instead he tipped his head toward his uncle. "He looks better."

"No, he still looks like shit, but today was a better day. He got word that he'll probably be home in time for Thanksgiving, and then we heard that Kelse was here, and that seemed to spark something for him. Like something good to focus on, I guess."

Sam grinned. "Another little kid to teach all the bad words."

His mom laughed. "Exactly. He loves corrupting the minors. And you know he's extra squishy for Kelse and her babies."

"Hey!" Gun called, his voice still a bit hoarse and weak. He'd lost all feeling and function from the waist down, but some above-the-waist stuff was impaired as well. Like his diaphragm, among other things. There was an oxygen tank on the back of his wheelchair, too, in case he needed it. "Quit talking *about* me over there, and get over here and talk *to* me."

"Sorry, Unc," Sam said. "Just getting the truth from Mom because you're a nasty liar."

“Fuck off, you little fucker,” Gun growled with a smirk. He raised his arm that wasn’t full of tubes, and Sam ducked low for a hug. Fuck, he was skinny. His shoulder blades stuck out sharp enough to cut. It had only been weeks since Laughlin, and it seemed like Gun had lost thirty pounds.

“Sorry I was an asshole the other day,” he said softly against Sam’s ear. “Some of this bullshit really gets me down.”

“Don’t be sorry. I say make use of this time when nobody gives you grief for being an asshole. Spread it around as much as you can. Pretty soon, people are going to stop giving you a pass. Don’t waste this moment.”

Gun laughed—a real laugh. Then he coughed, and Larissa jumped up to grab his cannula. Gun took it and gave his daughter’s hand a grateful squeeze, but he didn’t put the prongs in his nose.

Sam stepped back. “Hey, where’s Aid?”

“We told him to stay at school,” Aunt Leah answered. “He’s missed so much this semester, and he’s trying to catch up so his grades don’t slip low enough he gets kicked from the team.”

“Gotcha.”

“How’s Athena? Everything go okay?” Mason asked—which surprised the hell out of Sam. When they’d left for Kansas, his brother had not known the purpose of their trip, but it sounded like he knew it now.

It sounded like he knew, but it wasn’t definitive. Eventually everything got known in this family, but Sam was not going to be the one spreading this bit of intel, so he said, “Yeah. She’s good.”

Mason started to say something more, but his attention caught at something behind Sam. Sam turned and saw that Duncan and Hannah, Kelsey’s siblings, had stood. Their parents were probably in the delivery room.

When Duncan and Hannah started to walk toward the waiting room entrance, everybody fell in with them. Sam

grabbed the handles of Gun's wheelchair and pushed him forward.

"Should I go vroom vroom?" he asked, leaning down to tease his uncle.

"Again I say fuck off, you little fucker, Gun answered, still grinning.

Sam was expecting to see Dex holding his new child—they didn't know the sex yet—but it was Maverick. Alone, and not looking like a beaming grandfather.

"Oh shit," Sam's mom said.

"Get up there, Deb," Gun said. "What's wrong?"

Sam's mom didn't need to push to the front; everybody was making way for Mav to come to the middle.

"PAPA! PAPA! PAPA!" shrieked Tildy, running full-tilt to her grandfather.

"Everybody's okay," Maverick began, as he swung his granddaughter up and onto his hip. "That's first. Everybody's okay. But there was some trouble. The cord was wrapped around one of his legs, and the compression lowered his heartrate, so they did an emergency C-section. That was as scared as I've ever been in my life, I can tell you. But they're both okay. Dex is a fuckin' mess, and Jenny's not all that much better, but Kelse is a trouper." Finally, Mav found a smile. "She's tired and dopey, but she's good. And my grandson is fuckin' beautiful."

"Excellent, love. And it's a boy!" Grammo said, sliding her arm around Mav's waist. "Do we have a name for him yet?"

Mav hooked his arm around Grammo's shoulders as his grin broke wide. "Ethan. Ethan Richard Denson. Seven pounds, eleven ounces. Head's as bald as Eight's."

Eight chuckled. "I'm mindin' my business over here and still catchin' shrapnel."

"You can take it, baby," Marcella told him as she patted his hairless dome.

Sam felt a small, familiar hand slip into his, and he smiled down at Athena. “Hi there. You okay?”

She nodded, but she looked distracted and introspective again. He thought he knew why. “Did somebody sign for you?”

“Mom did.”

“The baby’s okay. Kelsey’s okay. No worries.”

“Some worries.” She shuddered, and then she raised her eyes to his again. “I don’t want to do that, Sam. Ever. If you want kids ...”

He caught her hands before she finished. “I’ve always known how you feel about that, and it doesn’t change anything for me. I want *you*. If we decide we want to be parents, we’ll adopt, if we can. Maybe we can adopt a Deaf child. Or we’ll have a hundred animals and call them our furbabies and spoil them rotten. I just need *you*, Frosie. Just you. Everything else is negotiable.”

She smiled and wound her small body around his. Sam folded her up snugly. He saw both her parents watching them intently, and only then realized that anyone in the room who’d been looking would have understood their conversation, because they all knew ASL. Especially her parents.

So they knew that Sam and Athena had pretty much planned their forever together right here and now.

Jacinda smiled at him.

Apollo gave him a single nod.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Athena woke in a watery stream of light. The atomic clock on Sam's desk told her it was almost seven in the morning. Too early on a November Saturday to get out of bed, so she rolled over, meaning to snuggle up in the warm cocoon of her guy's body.

As she rolled, her bladder woke up. Deciding to ignore it, she tunneled in until she was under Sam's arm and had her face tucked against his wonderful bare chest. He smelled so good, all the time—she even liked the way his sweat smelled. In his sleep, he tightened his arm to pull her closer. If she could stay right here all day long, it would be a perfect day.

Tragically, her bladder would not allow itself to be forgotten, and eventually, she had no choice but to worm her way as carefully as possible out of his hold—she checked, and didn't think she'd woken him—and out from under the thick layers of blankets until she stood beside the bed in underwear and a t-shirt.

Though the Spellmans' house looked like an old farmhouse, it was actually a replica of the original house, which had burned down twenty-something years earlier. It had real HVAC and good windows and all that, but somehow the second floor was always cold in the winter and warm in the summer. Athena grabbed Sam's green flannel shirt from yesterday and wrapped herself up in it like a robe.

When she got to the door, she saw that Blanche was watching, ready to be needed. Athena smiled; Blanche and Tank had managed to become friends. Tank had gotten familiar enough with her to calm down, and Blanche had then decided he wasn't dangerous. Now they were curled up like yin and yang in Tank's big bed. They looked like best friends.

Athena gave Blanche the 'all clear' sign and told her to stay. Then she opened the door, checked to make sure none of Sam's family was around to see her scurry across the hall in basically nothing but his shirt, scurried, and closed herself into the bathroom.

Which was colder than Sam's room. Sitting on the toilet was like putting her bare ass on a block of ice. Seriously, Spellmans! Were they secretly, like, from Iceland or something?

For all its demands, her bladder was slow to acknowledge the green light she'd sent it. Athena sighed and shivered and was headed toward a mood when she noticed that the liner in her underwear was completely white and completely dry.

That was two whole days without any more bleeding. Not even a spot since Thursday morning.

It had been two and a half weeks since their field trip to Kansas, and apparently the world's longest period was over.

It was over. All of it was *over*.

Something welled up in her chest like a balloon, and Athena coughed, thinking that would clear it—but with the cough came tears, and then she was sitting on the toilet in a cold bathroom, crying her eyes out. She had cried more in the past couple of weeks than she had since she was like ten. Three or four full-on crying jags over all this bullshit.

Sam insisted that Hunter had really hurt her, much more than she'd been willing to acknowledge. She hated it with a fiery rage, but he was right. She'd been unable to see it or even feel it until the end, but the pain had been lying in wait to ambush her.

She'd come to understand that she felt better if she just had the stupid cry than if she shoved it down and forced it to stop. She felt like a weak little kid when she cried, but then it was over, and she could breathe a little more deeply, feel calm sinking in a little more. Like every tear was a bit of infection draining off. Or something.

So she had her cry—these were tears of relief, and they were easier not to hate—then flushed, wrapped the liner in a lot of paper and tossed it away, washed her face and hands, fluffed her hair, and headed out of the bathroom.

The end of the bleeding meant the completion of her healing, in body and in mind. And that meant this morning had

suddenly gotten a lot more exciting.

As she came out of the bathroom, she saw Mason coming out of his room, fully dressed. They both stopped short.

“Morning,” Mason signed. Athena saw his eyes take in her less-than-dressed state. Sam’s shirt came to her knees, and the sleeves dangled well past her fingertips, so she wasn’t looking particularly sexy. Not that Mason had ever said or done anything that suggested he thought of her as anything more than a cousin and his brother’s best friend.

She decided to ignore his look and her state of dress. “Morning. You’re up early.”

“Gotta feed the animals and turn them out. No days off on the farm.”

That had been one of Sam’s refrains as well, when he’d worked full-time here. “Right,” she replied. “Of course.”

Mason nodded. As he reached the top of the stairs, he turned back with an impish grin. “Dad’s gone for the day, and Mom’s outside already, so you’ve got the house to yourself for about an hour or so, until Mom comes in to make breakfast. If, you know—”

Athena cut him off before he got any more obnoxious. “Get out of here, Mason. Shoo.”

“Kicking me out of my own house. Typical.” Still grinning, he turned and started down the stairs before she could fire back.

~oOo~

Sam was awake and scrolling on his phone. He smiled when she came in and closed the door. “Morning, beautiful.”

“Morning.” Both Tank and Blanche were up and about as well, so Athena gave them some love before she went to the bed. She climbed up and kneeled at his side. “Two days without bleeding. You know what that means?”

His smile split his whole face. “Yeah? You’re ready? You feel good?”

“I feel excellent. Plus, I saw Mason in the hall just now, and he’s on his way out to take care of the animals. Everybody is out of the house but us.”

“Holy shit.” He jumped out of bed and grabbed his jeans off the floor. “Give me a couple minutes. I’m going to let Tank out for his morning watering. Can I let Blanche out, too?”

“Yes, but don’t leave her out.”

“I won’t. I’ll bring them both in, feed them, and get back up here while they’re not paying attention. You stay here and get under the covers.”

Sounded like a plan to her. “Here. Take your shirt.”

He took it and slipped it on. “Looks better on you.”

“That’s a lie, and you’re a dork.”

“Maybe I’m a dork, but I’m not lying. C’mon, puppies.” At the door, he looked back. “Do we need condoms? They’re in the top drawer of my desk.”

“They gave me the Pill at the clinic, Sam.”

“I know. Just ... if you’d feel safer or ...”

“I feel completely safe. And eager. Hurry up.”

With a salute, he left the room, the dogs following, both tails wagging happily.

~oOo~

He was back in less than five minutes, and he was already taking off his clothes. While he was away, he must have goosed the thermostat up several degrees; delicious warm air coursed from the vent.

Athena had used the time to get naked and under the covers. When Sam was naked, too, he took a flying leap at the bed and landed so hard next to her she practically bounced off.

Laughing, she shoved at him, and he shoved back, and then they were wrestling and tickling and laughing. Like the old days, and also nothing at all like those days.

All at once, both at the same time, the goofiness stopped, and they were simply looking at each other, both panting and mussed, bare bodies tangled together. Athena felt a flash of profound understanding: this was the moment. This one, right here: Saturday, November 18, 2023, in a bedroom on the second floor of a farmhouse outside Grant, Oklahoma.

This was the beginning. This was where they started, surrounded, but unburdened, by the past.

“I love you, Samwise.”

His smile was so soft and sweet, so deep and private, Athena felt a warning cramp at the back of her throat. But she swallowed it away; this was no time for tears, not even happy ones.

“I love you, Frosie.” Gathering her up close, he rolled them, putting her on her back and hovering above her. “And I’m in awe of you. Always have been. Your strength and your will. Your fight and your *grace*. You’re tough, but you’re gentle, too. You never give up, but no matter how frustrated or tired you get, you don’t let it make you hard. It’s so beautiful to watch, and to feel.” He managed to say all that with only one hand.

She brushed her fingers over a beard that had become full again, the way she liked best. She combed back the wave of hair that flopped messily over his forehead again, the way she liked best. She used two hands to tell him, “You are the kindest person I’ve ever known. In some people, kindness looks like weakness, but not in you. In you, it’s strength, because you’re not afraid to do what has to be done. And you take people as they are. I’m so glad we finally saw that we were this.”

“Me too. This is forever. People would probably tell us we can’t know that, but I know it.”

“I know it, too. You and me.”

“You and me.” He brought his head to hers and kissed her.

For an infinite time, they simply made out, exploring each other’s mouths as their hands roamed over the rises and dips of their bodies.

Athena’s hands were more than appendages, more than tools. They were extensions of her very identity. Her hands were her voice, the way she was known to the world—and even to herself. She was so constantly aware of them, she wondered if they weren’t literally more sensitive, more *sensing*, than those at the ends of hearing peoples’ arms.

Right now she would swear that she could feel more than Sam’s mere skin as her hands traversed the planes of his back, his shoulders, his arms, as they slipped through his thick hair, brushed his beard. She would swear that she felt *him*, his essence, his soul. And through her hands, she knew him as deeply as she knew herself.

Her fingers slipped over the raised seam of the scar on his neck, the sign of how close she’d come to losing him before she’d had all of him. Sam lifted out of their kiss then and gazed down at her. His lips gleamed wetly; his eyes held steady and took in all of her.

Then he ducked away, moving lower. He trailed light kisses over one collarbone and then the other. He made a path down the center of her breastbone and then detoured to lavish attention on one nipple, until Athena writhed and stretched beneath him in gathering ecstasy, then he moved to the other to give it its due.

Then, when so much want and need flowed through her she could hardly keep still, he ducked lower and paid tribute to every scar on her abdomen.

Athena didn’t think much about those scars. They were old and faded, and they’d been there so long they usually had all the psychic baggage of a freckle. Lately, while she’d grappled with feeling weak after Hunter, and with her nerves about the abortion, she’d thought more about all the things her body had gone through just to make it to adulthood, all the things that

had had to be repaired, or couldn't be repaired and had to be accommodated.

It had made her feel weak in a way she hadn't in a long time. But lying here now, with the past truly ended and the future truly beginning, she remembered something her parents had always taught her: her scars were signs of strength, not of weakness. Her small stature, her deafness, the surgeries to remove or repair the pieces of her that had not had a chance to grow properly, all the circumstances of her premature birth, they didn't make her weak.

They made her strong. She had survived all that. Her mother had survived a brutal attack and, against massive odds, had persevered to give her life. Nothing about a life born of such fierce determination to overcome could be weak. Small as she was, Athena was a powerhouse.

Armstrong women were Amazons—even when they were less than five feet tall.

After Hunter, she'd forgotten that. He'd made her feel weak, made her feel powerless. He'd stolen her strength.

He'd tried to, at least.

She understood why Sam loved on her scars like he did, and she loved him for it all the more.

He knew her as deeply as anyone ever could.

He understood her, and he would never try to take her power away. Instead, he would honor it, love it, as he loved her. When she forgot, he would remind her. And she would do the same for him.

He was her person.

Forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A few days before Thanksgiving, Sam was drinking at the bar in the clubhouse party room, with his dad on one side and Duncan on the other. The other Bulls were clustered around as well. They were waiting for Eight; he'd called a meeting.

They'd discussed Gunner's progress—he'd been discharged the week before—and had given Sam plenty of shit about beginning to apprentice auto-body work. They'd moved on to peppering Dex with questions about Ethan, whose leg was going to be fine, and Kelsey, who was healing up well from her C-section, and Tildy, who wasn't sure she liked the stranger who'd taken over her house, when Eight came in from the hall that led to the kitchen and the side entrance.

"Let's go, fellas," he said as he came through the room. They all fell in and headed to the chapel, dumping their phones in Apollo's bin before they went through the door.

Out in the kitchen, some of the women were putting together a meal for after the meeting. Athena wasn't among them; there was a student production at her school tonight, and she was one of the advisors for it.

While the patches had waited for their president, they'd also talked about what was on the agenda—the things they knew they were meeting to discuss and the things they figured would be on the table. Sam had sat and only listened to the conversation. He hadn't been at the table long enough yet to feel like he had anything of value to say about most things.

The big thing everybody knew they had to talk about: Eureka, California.

And that was how Eight opened the meeting when they were all seated.

He glared at the center of their table as he began. "I guess everybody's heard that the Nameless told us to fuck off again. They don't want the patch. Niko says it's got to be them, and you know we're on his hook over Laughlin's fuckup with their prospect and the sheriff."

“That means what?” Duncan asked. “Are we really gonna start a war in fuckin’ California?”

“No,” Eight said, staring straight at him. “We are not gonna start a war in fuckin’ California.”

When Duncan frowned and opened his mouth to ask more, his father cut in. “Eight means it’s not going to be a war,” Maverick explained. “We’re gonna go in, end them, and take over.”

“Jesus. Really?” Jay muttered.

“You got something productive to say, JJ, or you just gonna sit there and snark?” Dex asked.

“I’m not snarking,” Jay answered. “I think it’s fuckin’ stupid. Blowing up assholes who did us dirty is one thing, but the Nameless are nothin’ to us.”

“You don’t—” Eight started, but Jay threw up his hand and talked right over him.

Sam was seriously impressed. That took some balls.

“I know they were some kind of big bad back in the Eighties or whenever, but as far as I know, and I asked my old man about this, we never crossed paths with them. And now they’re barely hanging on. All they have is their name and their rep, and obviously it means something, because they’d rather have that than the bank they’d earn after a patch-over. If somebody came at us wanting to rip the Bull off our backs, we’d tell ‘em to fuck off, too. We’d probably send the message with a rocket launcher.”

“Are you saying you’re worried about hurting their fuckin’ feelings, kid?” Eight snapped.

“No. I’m saying I get why they don’t want the patch, we have no reason of our own to go to war with them, and we’re doing this because Niko wants the Bulls there so he can turn north again. Right?” When he got enough nods to that question, Jay added, “I think it’s fuckin’ stupid to think we can go in, erase a club that’s been there for decades, and then stay around and set up fuckin’ shop in the hole we made. We’ll have fifty different targets on our chests before we can get the

locks changed. The whole reason we were looking to patch somebody over is we don't have to start from scratch like we did in Laughlin. Seems to me, taking a club out like this is worse than starting from scratch. It's literally starting in the hole."

Having made his point, Jay sat back. The chapel remained silent for quite a while after. Sam figured the others were working through the same things he was: shock at how forcefully Jay had made his point, admiration for how well he'd made that point, and then working through the truth of it all. He was completely right.

Which was probably why Eight was so obviously angry when he responded. "Don't dive deeper than you can swim, kid. Get back to the shallow end where you fuckin' belong."

"That's out of line, Eight," Sam's dad said. He turned to Jay. "You're right, Jay. It's a bad situation. But we're behind it on this one, because we owe Niko. We try to keep things balanced between us and the Volkovs, but the shit in Laughlin put us in the hole. And that's the bigger hole."

Eight slammed a fist on the table. Then he took a deep breath and managed something like calm. "Look. Yeah, kid. You're right. It sucks, and it's a dangerous way to establish a charter. But Laughlin fucked up. They didn't handle their shit, and they brought a fuckin' mole into their clubhouse. Son of a bitch was feeding intel straight to that damn sheriff. What's a mess for Laughlin is a mess for us, and we gotta clean it up."

"What's a mess for Eureka'll be a mess for us, too, right?" Monty asked. "So if we start messy, that'll make problems for everybody. Doesn't Niko see that?"

When, instead of answering, Eight put his elbows on the table and began rubbing his bald head with both hands, Maverick jumped back in.

"Niko's no idiot. He sees it as clear as we do, and he's knows things are difficult for him when they're difficult for us. But the situation is getting complicated again, brothers."

“Complicated as in the Perro shit?” Chris asked. He wasn’t related to any of the older Bulls and hadn’t even been a prospect back then. But those years had become club lore, and Julio Santaveria was like a monster under the bed to those who hadn’t experienced it firsthand.

“Not the same,” Maverick said, “but in the ballpark, yeah.” He cleared his throat and leaned in. “Look. Mexico was chaos right after we ended Santaveria. He left a huge vacuum down there, and a bunch of assholes he’d choked out came out of the cracks and starting fighting over the Perro bones. Eventually things calmed down, and it looked like they’d made a truce, but what really happened is somebody is climbing to the top of the heap, and the competition is shrinking.”

“Dora Vega,” Apollo supplied. “La Zorra.” When Mav made a gesture clearly throwing the subject to Apollo, he kept going. “Dora has big resources, a powerful will, and a stomach of steel. This chick is systematically subduing or subsuming the other cartels, from old names to upstarts. She’s got a couple of serious rivals left, which is my call on why she ordered full-on artillery from the Russians, but it’s obvious that she’s the force to reckon with down there. It’s also clear that she’s got every bit the power Santaveria had if not more—or will soon. Niko wants his alliance with her to stay strong, and Dora wants a pipeline into Canada that goes straight up the coast. And she wants it now.”

“Guns south and drugs north,” Caleb’s tone was somber. “And we’re on the hook for the whole distance?”

“Maybe not,” Eight said. “According to Niko, Dora’s done some research of her own, and she likes the look of the Horde in SoCal.”

“They ride straight, though,” Fitz said.

Dex let out a dark chuckle. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. The Missouri Horde ride straight now and probably won’t ever work dark again. They were never built to be hardcore outlaws. But the Horde in SoCal were Scorps back in the day. Those guys have got to be going crazy on the straight

road. You know they're not making any bank. What, selling custom bikes? Come on."

For the first time in the meeting, Eight grinned. "A couple of 'em do stunt riding for Hollywood, too, don't forget." The smirk on his face and the snark in his tone made it clear what he thought about that, and most of the patches laughed. "Anyway, point is, maybe SoCal jumps down off the high road and gets pulled in with us, and *they* can handle the southern segment of the run, bring it to Eureka, and our new charter can handle the northern segment. If we work this right, we could get all the Bulls out of Mexico on these runs. I think that's worth some bullshit in Eureka."

Sam felt like he was the one in deeper than he could swim. So much of this discussion was based on things he knew only as stories, or didn't know even that well. He'd kept his mouth shut and simply listened, trying to gather as many details as he could so he could work later on understanding them all as well as he could.

But he had one question he needed an answer to before he could begin to understand how and why all this would work. "Can somebody lay out what the routes would look like? If that's not a stupid question."

Fitz answered him. "It's not stupid, Sam. It's complicated. In general, if it all works out like we want, it'll look like: we pick up from the Russians, as always, and move it to Laughlin. Laughlin carries it to the Horde in SoCal, if the Horde is in, and the Horde moves it south. If the Horde's not in, Laughlin takes it into Mexico, like they're doing now. They flip the cargo and turn around, take it north to Eureka, where whoever we've got up there takes over and moves it to Canada. That's in general. Shit changes a lot, and sometimes Niko will have cargo going *to* him, but those are the routes we're trying to lay down."

"Thanks, bruh," Sam said, once the map made sense in his head.

"Okay, fellas," Eight said. "We've had our little chat. I hope y'all got what you needed to off your chest."

As if sensing that Eight was about to be undiplomatic, Maverick took over. “What it comes down to is we owe Niko. We almost lost millions of dollars of his cargo, and it doesn’t matter that it happened in Laughlin. There’s no use pointing fingers at them, because they’re us. It was a Bulls fuckup, period. We had a spy in one of our houses, he was there for a while, and Niko’s confidence in our partnership took a hit. On top of that, he handled the problem at the root of all that, a problem the Bulls weren’t able to solve, at least not quickly enough. If we decide we really don’t want to do this patch-over, then let’s understand: the vote would be to break with the Volkovs. That might be the right move, but let’s not pretend that isn’t dangerous, too.”

Looking at his father, Duncan asked, “The Nameless are not good guys, right?”

“No, they are not,” Maverick answered. “They terrorized Humboldt County for a long time. They don’t have that kind of power these days, but yeah. When weed was king, they played dirty.”

Duncan nodded. “Okay, so maybe there won’t be a lot of blowback if we disappear them. If we do that thing you talk about, the nice patrol, or something—”

Mav smiled. “Charm patrol.”

“Charm patrol, right. Maybe we can make things better there. I mean, we don’t get shit from the cops here in Tulsa, because we play nice.”

“On that point,” Eight cut in, “I got no interest in digging into this right now, but it has to be said at this table that we have room in Tulsa because we play nice and we don’t cross City Hall. Also, we pay. We don’t give ‘em a reason to get in our way. I don’t give one ripe fuck how righteous you think your cause is, or how careful you think you are. I don’t care if you’re an officer. I don’t care if you’re the goddamn SAA. The next fucker, or collection of fuckers, that puts down a civilian without clearing it first at this table, I’m gonna have their motherfuckin’ patch. And if you hurt the club with that bullshit, I will have your motherfuckin’ *life*.”

He was, of course, talking about Hunter, as everybody at the table now knew. That had been a few weeks ago, and as far as Sam knew, there was no blowback from that at all. The report was he'd died in a car wreck. He'd been buried. End of story. Eight had had his rant at most of the people involved already, Sam included, but they hadn't had a formal meeting until now.

"Is there trouble about that?" Sam asked—and then clenched; he hadn't meant to speak.

"Not. The. Point, Sammy," Eight growled.

"I'm not going to apologize, Eight," Apollo said. "It's on me, I set it up. And I was not about to ask permission to deal with the fucker who raped my daughter."

"You think you wouldn't have gotten it?" Eight demanded. "There's nobody at this table who doesn't love Athena and wouldn't kill that bastard with their hands."

"I think it doesn't fucking matter. I wasn't asking permission."

"Then you shouldn't have used the barn."

Apollo was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded. "You're right. For that, I apologize."

As if that alone was all Eight had needed, he took and released a deep breath, rocked his head back and forth like he needed to loosen the muscles of his neck, and said, "About the Nameless, I like Duncan's point. Maybe we don't go in big and loud. They didn't do us wrong, so they don't need to be a message. They just need to get out of the way. Maybe we just take the fuckers out quietly and fill in the space they leave. Then we can do charm patrol and be the good guys in town. Yeah, it's starting from scratch again, but maybe we'll be the heroes this time. Maybe that's the play."

Jay slapped Duncan's arm. "Good one, bruh."

Eight cocked an eyebrow at them but didn't remark on the exchange. He went on, "Previous votes were about a patch-over. Now we need to vote on whether we take the Nameless out. If the vote's no, we gotta prepare to break with the

Volkovs. That means lean times ahead, and maybe a beef with Niko, though I think he'll just work on icing us out instead of making actual war. If we vote to keep to the plan, stick with him and move into Eureka, we got about a month or so to work out what that looks like. We move on the Nameless right after Christmas. Us and Laughlin both." He sighed. "Let's see a show of hands. All those still in favor of taking over the Nameless in Eureka, however we have to do it?"

It was Sam's first serious vote as a Brazen Bull. He waited for his father to vote and voted the same way. The way he would have voted on his own.

The decision was unanimous.

Sam hoped they weren't heading down a path darker than they could navigate.

~oOo~

"Are you worried?" Athena asked after she mounted Rollo, her buckskin Quarter Horse.

Sam was already astride Ragnar, his chestnut Tennessee Walker/Saddlebred cross. "Yes and no," he answered. Then, because an actual explanation would take too long and be too hard in ASL while they were riding, he turned Raggy and nudged him toward the woods. Athena and Rollo followed. They could talk when they got where they were going.

The big meeting about Eureka had happened the day before. As it was Thanksgiving week, Athena was off work. He was free today as well. He'd been busy the night before, and they hadn't had a chance to see each other. He really needed to talk shit out with her, and not on text or FaceTime. His brain was spinning so fast he could practically smell smoke.

The day had broken bright and clear and not especially cold, and Sam had helped Mom and Mason with the morning chores. While they'd been feeding the horses, Mom had mentioned that Sam rarely rode anymore, and suddenly he'd

really missed it. He and Athena used to ride together all the time.

So he'd called her to come over. When he'd mentioned riding the horses, she'd done a little giddy clap that made him think he was the reason they hadn't ridden in so long.

Ragnar, always a little on the ornery side, hadn't been exactly thrilled to have a saddle on his back after so long, but he was also extremely food-motivated, so a few apples had convinced him. Rollo was basically a thousand-pound dog, so he was just happy to be with his people and getting lots of attention.

As always, to the delight of the horses as well as themselves, they crossed the biggest pasture at a full gallop. Raggy bucked and danced at first, feeling his oats, but then he saw that Athena and Rollo were flying ahead, and he made it a race. Already Sam was feeling calmer and more centered.

When they got to the main trail leading into the woods, Athena pulled Rollo up. She turned back and watched Sam and Ragnar charging at them. Her face was flushed with exertion and her grin was about as wide as it could be. Her eyes sparkled in the sun.

Christ, she was beautiful. Everything about her was perfect. It was so incredibly stupid of them not to see what they were together, everything they were together, from the start.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "To the creek? The clearing? The ruins?"

Their three main destinations when they rode through these woods. Grinning at her, Sam led Ragnar past Rollo and onto the trail in the lead. He turned back and told her, "You'll just have to follow me."

Athena knew these woods almost as well as he did, so she knew where they were going as soon as he passed one trail offshoot and took another. He was headed to the ruins.

That was a name they'd come up with for this area of the property. It wasn't ruins, exactly, because no human

construction had ever been built here. But some kind of blight had happened to the trees here long ago, and several had fallen like dominoes, apparently around the same time. They were big old oaks, and the way they'd fallen looked like the tumbled remnants of an ancient village.

If you squinted. They'd been in grade school when they'd found it, so it helped to have a childish imagination. To Sam's older eyes, they looked like decaying fallen trees. But they would always be the ruins to him and his best friend.

The best part of this area was the cool web of branches from the top of the biggest fallen tree, which made something like a tent. As kids, they'd had room to create big fantasies under that crisscrossed dome, but as adults all they could really do was sit under there to talk—which was all they'd wanted to do once they weren't kids anymore.

Now Sam couldn't help but imagine new fun things they could do. When it was warmer. And he had a blanket or something to lay on the rocky ground.

They dismounted and let Rollo and Ragnar graze while they crouched low and scrambled into their hiding place.

"Talk to me, Samwise," Athena said before she was even settled. "'Yes and no' is where you left it, and that answer needs some development."

"You know I can't get into details, but yes, I'm worried because it's a big move, and there are things that could make it dangerous."

"Yeah, that makes me worried."

"But it's yes and no because, come on, Frosie. This is what our life has always been like. It was scary every time our dads rode off on a run, but it's also ... I don't know ... familiar. It feels like life. I'm not sure I'd know what to do in a normal life. I think that was what happened when I realized I wanted in. I didn't feel right on the outside. The club feels like the way things should be. And yeah, something bad could happen. My dad went down for five years, kinda when I needed him

most. Gun won't walk again because he took two bullets saving my ass. Uncle Beck died."

"You almost died," Athena reminded him, her eyes round.

It was funny how little he thought about getting shot himself, unless he was thinking about Gunner saving him. "Yeah. A lot of guys've died. That's all scary and sad. I don't want to get hurt or killed. I want to be with you until we're old and cranky and we die together in our bed when we're like a hundred and ten. But I honestly feel like I'd die quicker if I was a cubicle guy wearing a tie. Like I'd just shrivel up and fall over, the way these trees did. So in that way I'm not worried about what happens in Eureka. No matter what happens there, it'll happen in the right life."

Athena didn't respond quickly. She sat beside him, crisscrossed with branchy shadows, and sorted small rocks into constellations on the ground before her.

When she stayed quiet longer than he could stand, Sam tapped her knee to get her attention. "Does that make sense?" he asked.

"It does, yeah. I feel that, too. I'm always a little freaked out when I go to a normie friend's house. It feels a little like a foreign country—or how I think that would feel, anyway. Something completely different from my version of life. I get it. And I've obviously been scared the same ways when Dad goes off, and now when you go off. I don't want to lose you. I think dying in bed together when we're ancient is perfect. But yeah, I get it. This is our life. It's weird to everybody but us."

"Exactly. My folks talk a lot about not putting shit off. Mom says it like, 'Don't throw away a day you have trying to make room for a day you can't be sure is coming.'" It's her version of YOLO. But that feels like a good way to live. Even normies can't know they have a tomorrow, but they live like they have all the tomorrows they want. We know how fast shit can go wrong, how bad it can get, how much we can lose, so we don't take anything for granted while we have it, and we know we can survive the things we lose. We know we can get back up and find the good again, because we've done it

already, and we've seen our family do it over and over again. We get back up. Even if there's a hole in our family, we get back up. Even if it's in a wheelchair, we get back up. I guess it's weird, but that feels comfortable to me. It feels right."

Athena laughed. "I love you. And I love that we're weird in exactly the same way."

He pulled her onto his lap. "That's because we were made for each other."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

EPILOGUE

Thanksgiving

Athena slapped Sam's hands away from the plastic container she was trying to close. "Oh my GOD, stop eating! Twenty minutes ago you were complaining that your stomach was going to explode in a gory plume."

He grinned and snagged yet another piece of turkey before she finally got the lid sealed. "Twenty minutes is a long time." He lifted the piece of turkey high and dropped it into his mouth.

Aunt Deb came over, laughing, and signed, "Honey, give it up. He and his brother can eat their weight hourly. You know this."

Shaping her face into a theatrical glare, Athena signed at Sam, "If you think I'm cooking for you every day, think again, pal."

He put his hands up in surrender before he replied, "Hey, I'll make my own food and yours too, if you want." Then he gave her a sly grin and leaned in. "I'm a better cook than you, anyway."

Athena reached up and slapped him upside the head, even though he was probably right. Her interest in things like cooking and other 'domestic goddess' bullshit was not what one might call keen.

They'd decided it was time to move in together. That was as far as they'd gotten in the decision-making process, but that much was firm. Now they were playing out two options—an apartment or rented house in the city, with the plan of saving up to buy a house, or Uncle Gun's suggestion of putting a house on the farm somewhere. Uncle Gun and Aunt Leah, and Uncle Simon and Aunt Deb had built houses within sight of each other on Gun and Deb's family property, and Sam's

family—not to mention Sam himself—thought that was a great idea.

Athena liked it, too. The farm was awesome and she loved to visit. She loved all the animals, she'd be able to ride Rollo a lot more often, and the distance from the city meant the sky was glorious on any clear night. But she'd always lived in the city, and the thought of living out in the boonies made her a little nervous, too. It seemed isolating, even if they built a little cottage within sight of the other houses. On the other hand (and paradoxically), she also felt like everybody would be in their business if they joined the what Aunt Deb called the 'family commune.'

Sam was okay with living in the city, too—they both worked there, after all—but she knew he was primarily okay with it for her sake. He loved the farm a lot. So they were working out the details. But the decision to become their own little family of two (plus two dogs) had been made, and really, that was the important part.

As she slid the container into one of the few remaining slots in Grammo's crammed fridge, Sam set his hand on the small of her back. She turned to him, and he nodded toward the doorway to the dining room. Uncle Simon and Uncle Mav stood there.

"It's time?" she asked.

"It's time," he answered. "Will you tell Leah?"

Since he'd started prospecting with the club, he'd begun dropping 'Aunt' and 'Uncle' from the way he referred to the older generation of their family—sporadically at first, but now it was getting to the point that he rarely used 'Aunt' or 'Uncle' anymore. She understood, but it still felt weird to her.

"Sure."

He kissed her cheek and headed toward the doorway. He paused to say something to his mom on the way. He didn't sign, but she knew he was asking for her help to start corralling people as well.

Uncle Gun had been home for almost two weeks. The preparations for getting him there had taken several weeks—in his house, doorways had been enlarged, safety features had been installed in bathrooms, the dining room had been made into a first-floor master bedroom, and more. Also, Sam and Mason had totally rebuilt the Wessons' porches to accommodate switchback ramps that his new electric wheelchair could navigate easily.

The Spellmans' house had undergone some changes as well, including ramps on their front and back porches and widening of first-floor doorways.

Uncle Gun and Aunt Leah also now had a new van with a wheelchair lift, and a portable ramp they could put down over stairs when they were away from home—as they'd done to get Uncle Gun into Grammo and Gramp's house today.

But the biggest thing, or at least the most exciting, was what they were giving him today. His Christmas present from the club. It was a month early, but the weather now was good enough that he could use it. They couldn't be sure about that at the end of December.

Anyway, he needed something good. Athena had been watching him all day; though he wasn't in a bad mood, he was subdued, which wasn't a natural state for Uncle Gun. He was hyper, usually, always involved in every conversation going on around him, laughing, snarking, stuffing his face, drinking, engaging in general revelry.

Today, at the typically epic Thanksgiving dinner table, he'd been quiet, mostly observing everybody else talking. Also, he'd barely eaten. That was probably due as much to his continuing recovery as to his mood, but it was definitely a noticeable difference. He needed something good—and, she thought, he needed to be the center of attention for a reason that wasn't worry about how he was feeling.

Athena understood how annoying and demoralizing it could be to constantly field the 'Are you okay?' question.

She went to the laundry room, where Aunt Leah was putting a load of table linens into the washer. When Athena

arrived at the open door, Aunt Leah was wearing a serious, contemplative expression, but she smiled when she saw Athena.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she signed. “What’s up?”

“I think they’re ready out front. Sam asked me to tell you it’s time.”

With a nod and then a sigh, Aunt Leah said, “Okay. I hope it won’t be a thing if he doesn’t react like everybody’s hoping. His mood is ... he’s struggling. Obviously.”

“I think everybody understands that,” Athena said. “That’s why they want to do it now and not wait for Christmas Day.”

Though she didn’t look especially convinced, Aunt Leah nodded again. “Okay. I’ll go get him.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, honey. I’ll get Aidan to help.”

~oOo~

When Aunt Leah, Aidan, and Larissa came out with Uncle Gun, almost the whole family was arrayed before them. The old ladies and kids stood in a messy semicircle on Grammo and Gramp’s front lawn, and the Bulls were lined up on the sidewalk in front of the club van. Uncle Rad and Gramps stood with them, the only ones not wearing kuttes.

Gunner steered his wheelchair down the portable ramp and onto the sidewalk. He was frowning, but not like he was pissed. More like he was trying to figure out what everybody was up to.

“What the fuck?” he asked. He didn’t sign, but Athena could see his mouth.

Uncle Eight nodded, and Uncle Simon opened the back of the van. He slid the ramp out and climbed into the cargo area. Sam and Mason stood at the doors, waiting to help.

The three of them rolled a brand-new Harley-Davidson Tri-Glide onto the street. It was so heavily modded it was basically a custom build, but at its heart it was still a Harley.

It was black, and Uncle Simon had done an elaborate paint job on the tank, with charging bulls on either side.

Behind the engine, where the seat would go on a factory bike, there was instead a platform where a motorized wheelchair could be locked down. A small, remote-controlled ramp would slide out from beneath, so Uncle Gun could get onto the platform and lock in himself.

They'd built it so that there was still a passenger seat. He could still ride with his old lady.

He stopped halfway down the driveway and stared.

Athena knew that most, probably all, of the Bulls had told him they'd figure out a way he could still ride, but she also knew that Uncle Gun had not been in the right frame of mind to believe or even hear that. So now, seeing that it was true, he was stunned.

"What the fuck did you do?" he finally asked. Again, he didn't sign, but she read his lips. She couldn't read his tone, however, and the reaction around her suggested it was aggressive.

Sam was with the other Bulls on the sidewalk, so Athena turned to her mom. "Is it okay?"

"It's Gun. He's going to need a minute," was her answer. But at least Mom started to interpret the conversation rising around them.

"Eight: We told you we'd get you on the road again. Come on, brother, take a look. The whole club put their backs into this."

"Gun: That's no way to ride."

"Rad: Hey, fuck off, brother. Nothin' wrong with three wheels."

"Gun: Yeah, well, you're an old man. Talk to me when I'm seventy, and we'll see."

“Rad: Sixty-eight, and fuck off again.” Uncle Rad was grinning, so Athena understood all that as bantering more than bickering.

Then Mom signed, “Leah’s talking to him, and Larissa, and I can’t hear what they’re saying. But the way he’s looking at Leah ...”

“Yeah, I can see that, Mom. My eyes work,” Athena replied.

The way Uncle Gun was looking at his old lady, it was very clear she was grabbing his mood by the nape. She pointed to the new trike. Athena thought she was pointing out the passenger seat. He scowled at the bike some more, but his expression finally began to soften. Eventually, he nodded.

The two of them came down the rest of the driveway. Aidan and Larissa stayed where they were, and Aunt Deb went over and sidled in between them, hooking her arms around their waists.

As Aunt Leah got him to really take a look at the bike, the Bulls clustered around them, blocking most of the view from the rest of the family. Or maybe only from Athena. The front yard was on a hill, so the street was lower. Maybe normal-sized people could see.

Then Mom signed, “He’s saying it doesn’t matter, he’ll never be able to pull his weight in the club from a chair, and he won’t be able to get his miles in. Eight’s saying yeah, that’s true, they’ll need to retire his kutte, but that doesn’t mean he’s sidelined. He can still ride, still ride with Leah, and still go on short runs with the family. Just like Rad.”

“What’s he saying to that?”

“Nothing yet. But he’s petting the trike, so that’s a good sign. Oh—Sam’s taking the ramp out, I think. Yep. Can you see?”

Athena was about to shake her head when Sam stepped back and made a clearing in their cluster, and she could see. Uncle Gun was putting the wheelchair on the ramp, and onto the platform.

Uncle Simon showed him how to lock the chair in and explained the controls. When Uncle Gun turned to Aunt Leah again, she smiled and climbed onto the passenger seat.

She leaned close and wrapped her arms around his shoulders; Uncle Gun's head dropped all the way to his chest. He hooked his hands around his wife's arms, and she rested her head on his shoulder. They sat like that for a long time, and the family bore witness to what Athena read as a shift in their grief for the life they'd had, to the first stirrings of hope for the life that would come.

Then Uncle Gun fired up his new trike, and they all watched as he took a few trips up and down the street, getting accustomed to the different controls.

When they pulled up behind the van again, Aunt Leah was grinning and wiping her eyes, and Uncle Gun made a thumbs-up.

Uncle Eight broke out of the group of patches and faced the lawn. He was one of the members of Athena's family who wasn't very fluent in ASL and didn't often sign unless he was talking directly to her, but now he did sign as he asked, "Who's up for a quick family run?"

Not all of the family had ridden to the house today, but all of the Bulls had, and several of the older kids, too. Most of the girls stayed back at the house, as well as the boys too young to ride on their own, and Kelsey and Felicia left their kids, the youngest in the family, in their care. Though Kelsey wasn't quite a month from a C-section, she went with Dex to his bike.

Aunt Marcella mounted up with Uncle Eight. Aunt Jenny with Uncle Mav. Kelsey with Dex. Aunt Ciss with Uncle Caleb. Athena's mom with her dad. Sam's mom with his dad. Aunt Kari with Uncle Fitz. Felicia with Jazz. Petra with Jay. Christian and his girlfriend, Kennedy. Grammo with Gramps, on his trike. Aunt Willa with Uncle Rad on his.

And Uncle Gunner and Aunt Leah.

Sam came up to Athena with a grin. "Ride with me?"

She grinned right back. "You know it."

As she climbed on behind Sam, Athena froze before she settled. She tapped Sam's shoulder and pointed to Monty. Though her brother, Duncan, was riding solo, Hannah was mounting up behind Monty.

Athena and Sam turned in unison toward Uncle Mav and Aunt Jenny. They hadn't noticed that interesting development yet. Maybe Monty was only giving Hannah a ride, but if it was more than that, Athena couldn't imagine Uncle Mav being anything but furious about it. He was trying with all he had to push Hannah toward a conventional life.

It was like he didn't actually know his own kid. Hannah was the least conventional person in their exceedingly unconventional family.

Sam looked over his shoulder and showed Athena surprised eyes.

"I know!" Athena told him.

Eight must have called them to get moving, because all at once, all around her, Bulls fired up their bikes. She could feel the vibrations of the engines rolling up from the ground and all through her body.

And the feel of Sam's bike reached her very soul.

As they pulled off and rode down the street in formation, Athena let her head fall back. She looked up at the deepening night sky. It was too early and they were too close to the city for all the stars to be visible, but she knew the map of the stars like she knew the lines on her palms. This was her world, her galaxy, her universe. In this family, she understood what was real, what was true, and what was right. No matter what happened in her life, no matter what evils and harms might befall her, or people she loved, she knew they were all where they belonged. Because they were never alone, never left behind.

Everything she had ever needed, anything she would ever want, was here.

Even her soulmate, who had been hers from the day of her birth.

“I love you! I love you!” she signed at Sam’s face, then wrapped her arms around him again and held on tight.

Sam dropped his hand, hooked it around her thigh, and squeezed.

THE END

Content Warning:

This story includes a rape as a major element of the plot. Though the incident is not graphically described, it does occur on the page.

Moreover, and related, this story includes an abortion as a significant event. While abortion is necessary because of the rape, and thus there is some trauma associated, at no time is this medical procedure described as a difficult or morally complicated decision, nor is the pregnancy in question ever considered a child. It is treated as simply healthcare, and a relief.

If these elements would be upsetting to you, you should probably avoid reading this story.

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