



MERCRESS FEW

MC

WEST VIRGINIA

*Almost*  
**HEAVEN**  
M.D. STEWART



ALMOST HEAVEN, MERCILESS FEW MC

WEST VIRGINIA CHAPTER

By M.D. STEWART

Copyright © 2023 by M.D. Stewart.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever including but not limited to being stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

WARNING : This book contains sexual situations, violence and other adult themes. Recommended for 18 and above.

Book and Cover design by: **Linny Lawless**

# Acknowledgments

Thank you to *Linny Lawless* for allowing me to be part of this fantastic MC series! Your covers are beautiful, and your writing inspires me. I'm a big fan and existing in your world is a huge thrill. Check out her [website](#) and the [Merciless Few MC website](#) too!

To my *husband*, your support means everything to me. You put up with my inattentiveness with humor. I love you.

To you, the *reader*, I appreciate you more than you'll know!

To *Kimberly K Myers* for helping me name Diana's sister. You have no idea what a relief I was to not have another "D" name to deal with!

# Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One - Viking](#)

[Chapter Two - Diana](#)

[Chapter Three – Viking](#)

[Chapter Four - Diana](#)

[Chapter Five - Viking](#)

[Chapter Six - Diana](#)

[Chapter Seven - Viking](#)

[Chapter Eight - Diana](#)

[Chapter Nine - Viking](#)

[Chapter Ten - Diana](#)

[Chapter Eleven - Viking](#)

[Chapter Twelve - Doc](#)

[Chapter Thirteen - Viking](#)

[Chapter Fourteen – Diana](#)

[Chapter Fifteen - Viking](#)

[Chapter Sixteen - Diana](#)

[Chapter Seventeen - Viking](#)

[Chapter Eighteen - Diana](#)

[Chapter Nineteen - Viking](#)

[Thank you for reading Almost Heaven!](#)

[Other books by M.D. Stewart](#)

[Social Media Links](#)

Almost Heaven is a dark, emotional tale of how the power of love can heal even the deepest of wounds.

Gunnar “Viking” Anderson

I never thought I’d return to West Virginia, not after my father was convicted of murdering my girlfriend, Hailey. But when my father dies, I’m forced to face the hometown I left behind. I’ve closed myself off to a happy life, content with the brotherhood I’ve found in the Merciless Few MC. That is, until I saved Diana Taylor during a brutal assault.

Diana Taylor

I’m searching for my missing niece but it’s Viking who ignites a search for something more. Despite his reservations, he says he can’t help being drawn to my strength and unwavering determination to find, and save Mariska. As I fight to break down his walls, I know Viking must confront the demons of his past or we won’t have a future. Am I strong enough to help him heal and discover that love is worth fighting for?

# Chapter One - Viking

One Year Ago

Ocean City, Maryland MFMC Mother Chapter



I GULPED THE beer in three swallows and slammed the empty bottle down.

“Are you trying to tear up the place?” The angry voice of the bartender cut through the noise. She was a new sweetbutt that I had never seen before. I gave her a slow up and down perusal. Even with her frown, she was hot.

I wasn't in a great mood. Ever since I got a call from home, I'd been restless and needed to change things up. I loved living here in Ocean City, I felt at home with my brothers in the Merciless Few. But something inside me wouldn't settle because I knew I needed to go home.

“Nah.” I leaned forward, putting my forearms on the scarred wood, trying to give my most charming smile. “I'm just,” I had no words for how I felt. I was closing in over fifty and feeling stuck. “I'm frustrated.”

The bartender grabbed my empty bottle. I watched her furiously wipe where my beer had been. No way I could tear up the already worn and scuffed surface. “Maybe you should get fucking laid, then. I don't want Zero to blame me because you tore up the club.” She walked off, shaking her head. I noticed she didn't offer herself as a candidate.

Fuck her.

The music changed, signaling a new dancer was hitting the stage of the Bump & Grind. The busty bleach blonde strolled on stage, her hips swaying to the music. She presented her back, her ass sticking in the air.

Her tits were fake, but that ass was real. Maybe I *did* need to bang out my frustrations, and maybe I just found my prospective partner.

Standing, I walked toward the dancer, my dick plumping up at the curvy bitch on stage. Ignoring a growing headache, I pulled the chain on my wallet, removing the leather from my back pocket before striding to the table right at the edge of the pole. Several men were hooting and whistling at the dancer, but I ignored them and kept my eyes trained on her luscious body.

Feeling generous, I pulled out a twenty. As I found a seat, I held it in the air between my outstretched index and middle finger.

The chick turned around, pushing her hair from her face. She spied the bill in my grasp, and slowly prowled toward me with a sexy grin. She rolled her hips suggestively then dropped to her knees. When she looked up, I noticed her makeup was done to perfection, but it didn't hide her age.

“Fuck.” Disappointment hit me hard. She looked young enough to be my daughter. My partial chub withered and died. Jesus if she was even twenty, I'd kiss Zero's ass. Little girls didn't do anything for me.

Years ago, it didn't matter how young or old the bitch was. If she was over legal and wanted some action, I was all in. Now, I felt like a perv if they were half my age. And when the girls were under twenty-five, they were children to me. “Fuck.” Saying it again didn't touch the headache that was brewing.

Getting older sucked balls.

A feminine hand slid up my arm and the smell of cheap perfume wafted from behind me and hit my senses like a damn

sledgehammer. I was glad I was sitting down. My headache grew exponentially.

The only reason a woman would smell like that was if she'd just been fucked and tried to mask it with a strong fragrance.

“Hey, Viking.” Selina’s voice purred in my ear. “You look tense, baby.”

I could feel her tits rubbing on my shoulders and smell whiskey on her breath. Mixed with the perfume, it ratcheted up my nausea.

Her hands trailed over my shoulders giving me a mini massage before running them down my chest. She laced her fingers together, pressing her breasts harder against my upper back. She whispered into my ear, “Want me to help you relax?”

Unlike the girl on the stage, Selina had been a sweetbutt for quite a few years. Hell, I’d fucked her dozens of times. Right now, I wasn’t sure I could get it up again, and I wasn’t going to have the bitch talking behind my back about it.

“Got other plans, babe.” I tossed the twenty on the raised dance floor, then stood. I glanced up to see the dancer’s face harden in resentment. I needed to get out of here and get some air.

I stood and turned, forcing Selina to drop her arms to her sides. Her brown eyes opened wide in surprise, then her red painted lips thinned in anger at my rejection. “Just dealing with a massive headache, babe. I’ll take a raincheck.” I held my breath as I leaned in and kissed her temple then strode from the stuffy strip club.

The cool air hit my face as soon as I stepped into the night. I took a few deep breaths trying to quell the urge to upchuck my beer in the parking lot. It had been years since I had a migraine, but it seemed I was heading down that road. Fucking hell.

I walked to my bike and grabbed my helmet. Putting that restrictive brain bucket on my throbbing head was almost



torture. I thought about breaking the law and riding without it, but I knew I couldn't handle being pulled over. I jerked it onto my head, cursing under my breath as I did.

I suddenly needed to be anywhere but here. I checked my watch, grinding my teeth when I saw the date. No wonder I wanted to run. Eighteen years had passed, and it still hurt like yesterday.

Hailey. Her name still haunted me. Since leaving my little hometown in West Virginia, I never uttered it. Unless I was dreaming—or fucking someone and her name slipped from my lips.

Remembering Hailey increased the stabbing of the migraine. At this point, it was probably unsafe for me to get on my bike. I considered calling Doc. He might have some medication that would ease the pain. Then again, I was close to home, and I really wanted to down half a bottle of Jim Beam and pass out on my couch.

I straddled my pride and joy, lifted the kickstand and started the Hog. The roar of the engine and vibration between my thighs eased the migraine slightly. I slowly pulled to the entrance of the lot and checked the road. I no more than hit the throttle when I felt like I'd been tossed into a clothes dryer.

My body rolled forever, the stars in the sky looked like blurry lines as I tumbled. When I stopped, I heard screams and shouts from both men and women. Bright light hit my face and Doc's voice rang out telling Tack to bring his medical bag.

“Viking, bro.” Doc's voice sounded concerned as he felt around my neck then my chest and ribs. “You're gonna be alright.”

It seemed to take forever to get my mouth to form words. “Just a migraine.” It took way too much energy to talk.

“No, dude, a cager came flying around the bend and clipped you. Fuck, you got some bad road rash.” Doc's voice was starting to fade. Even when I could hear him telling me to stay awake and focus on his voice, I could feel my body sinking deep into the blessed darkness.



BRIGHT LIGHT PIERCED my vision. I was surprised it didn't aggravate my migraine, but I felt no pain. Dazed, I licked my dry lips and tried to look around.

"It's about fucking time." Doc ambled over from somewhere out of my line of sight. "I thought your head was harder than that."

"What?" I was thoroughly confused. "All this because of a migraine?" I could tell my words caused my buddy concern. He stroked his long, braided beard.

"Gunnar, you may have had a migraine when you left the Bump & Grind, but you were hit by a car. Landed you here, Atlantic General ER." Doc leaned against the bed rail, arms folded over his chest.

"Fuck." My mood soured a bit. "When can I head home?"

Doc removed his cell from inside his cut. "After they get your blood alcohol test results back. I'm texting Zero, to let him know you're awake."

"I wasn't drunk, man. Only had one beer. I had a migraine."

"That's good news for you." A man in dark blue scrubs and bright rainbow hair breezed into the room. He looked down at an electronic device. "Gunnar Anderson?" At my nod he smiled. He was entirely too perky. In my current mood, it was irritating.

"I'm Alex. I got your blood test results. Your BAT came back under the limit, so no legal issues with that. Once the doc

writes your script and signs off on it, you'll be free to go. The instructions to treat all those scrapes and contusions will be on the discharge papers. Any questions?"

"No." I sat up looking at the IV. "Tell me there aren't narcotics in the drip."

The nurse glanced from the tablet in his hand to the bag hanging from the metal stand. "New policy states that we don't give narcotic pain medication to unconscious patients, especially if the hospital doesn't have their medical history. That is a normal saline drip with Toradol for pain management. Would you like the doctor to prescribe a non-narcotic pain medication along with your oral antibiotic?" I noticed there was no judgment, even though he probably figured I was a recovering addict.

"Nope. I don't need any pain meds, or antibiotics. I've had worse road rash than this before, I'll be fine. Tell him to just sign the papers and let me go. You can take this out too." I hated hospitals they held too many sick and dying people, and I wasn't one of them.

"Sure. Once the doctor releases you, I can take that out. It shouldn't be too much longer." He put the tablet down and pumped sanitizer into his hands. He gave a humorless smile as he grabbed gloves from the box on the wall.

Alex reached for his stethoscope. "It's been a little busy tonight, so it's taking her longer than usual. Once I get notified on my device there, I'll have you sign it, then you and your friend can be on your way."

Doc narrowed his eyes. "Viking, I see that look in your eye. Don't do anything dumb. You heard the man; it won't be long."

"You know how I feel about hospitals. I can't," I could feel my skin crawling. "I need to leave." I hadn't been inside an ER since the night I took Hailey.

Alex quickly finished the mini exam then grabbed his tablet. He patted my arm, looking sympathetic. "I'll go check

to see if Doctor Rahman can't hurry it up. Just hang in there." The nurse nearly sprinted from the room.

"Listen, you might not need those meds he offered, but I could use them for my pharmacy." Doc clicked his teeth then stared at me a minute. "You're lucky your bike isn't trashed. I'm surprised you haven't asked about it yet."

I knew he was just trying to distract me. "Yeah." I rubbed my face with my hands, trying to hide the rising panic. "So, what's the damage? And did they catch the bastard that hit me?" I shifted on the bed.

"Funny you should ask. Brass was just pulling in when the car passed him and clipped you. He took off after that cager like a bat out of hell. Caught him a quarter mile down the road. That's all I know about that. Your bike has some cosmetic shit that can be fixed in the shop. It'll take you longer to heal up than get your baby back to one hundred."

"That's how it should be." I tapped my fingers on the bed, getting antsy. "Doc, I need to leave. I'm fine. Even the headache is gone."

"What are you, bro? Five? The nurse has been gone for thirty seconds. What bug crawled up your ass? You're not you. And don't say it's being in the ER. You've acted fucked up since coming into the bar."

I knew he was right. Hell, I'd felt off all day, this was just making the whole thing worse. "It's the date man. Eighteen years go by, and you'd think I'd be over it." I closed my eyes and leaned back on the bed. "I got a call from home today. The old man was found dead. Motherfucker shot himself. On the damn anniversary he killed her, the coward shot himself."

"Christ. Do you think the fucker felt guilty or something?" Doc looked up from his phone. He was texting someone, probably Zero.

"After this long? No. Asshole probably got high and didn't even know he was doing it." That was one reason I didn't get mixed up with drugs of any type. I'd seen what it does to people. My dad. Hailey, too.

The conversation and laying in that hospital bed brought up the memory of seeing my old man killing Hailey. I had just walked into the house from a long shift at work. From behind, I saw my old man on top of someone, straddling them, his hands were hidden by his body. It wasn't until I got further into the room that I realized it was Hailey under my dad.

I jumped the ratty couch and ripped the asshole off my girl and punched him so hard he went down and didn't get up.

Hailey's lips were blue, her eyes open. The whites of her eyes were streaked with red. I'll never forget that sight, it still haunts my dreams. I threw her over my shoulder and tossed her in my dad's old shitty car.

At the ER, I ran into the hospital screaming my head off for help. It only took the nurses a few seconds to pull us both back to one of the exam rooms.

In my heart I knew Hailey was gone, but I begged them not to stop working on her. And, to their credit, they did everything they could.

Eventually, the doctor told me there was no going back. Even if Hailey miraculously came to, she'd been without oxygen for so long she'd be permanently impaired, living on a vent and being fed through a tube that ran from her nose to her stomach.

I left my sweet girl in that ER room, stumbled outside and puked my guts up in the bushes. After I drove home, I found Pops with a needle in his arm. He never even asked where Hailey was, or why his jaw was broken. It took everything in me not to kill the bastard, but I did call the cops.

I didn't even wait for the trial, or care if my dad got put in prison. I fucking hit the road. I had an old motorcycle that I'd worked on when I wasn't fixing motors at the city bus garage. There was no reason for me to hang around. My girl was dead, her ashes scattered in the mountains, while my old man was put away for thirty years.

From what I'd heard, the bastard got out on some bullshit reason. I never cared to find out why, I just kept my distance

from him and West Virginia. I knew if I hadn't been in Ocean City when he was released, I'd have killed him myself. As it turned out, he'd saved me the trouble.

And I didn't even have to go through hoops to hide his body.

What got me so out of whack today? The medical examiner called saying I needed to come to Charleston and decide what to do with him. I told the M.E., "Fuck the bastard. Let his body lay somewhere until he rots and explodes."

That fucker destroyed my soul when he killed Hailey. My father didn't deserve any more of my time. The old man wasn't even going to get a dime of my money to bury or cremate him. Let the state have him.

Reliving that night and dealing with the medical examiner was too much. I was a bad ass biker, but I knew I'd be crying like a baby if I didn't leave the hospital.

"Doc, I need to get out of here." My heart was pounding, my palms were sweaty. I was afraid I'd hyperventilate.

Alex walked in, that tablet in his fucking hand. "Okay, Doctor Rahman's shift is over, but Doctor Shavez is looking over your chart now."

"I'm not waiting for another doctor to go over shit. I'm out." Reaching over, I grabbed the IV needle and jerked. Blood welled up and dripped on the floor, quickly leaving a large puddle.

"God *dammit*, Viking." Doc slapped his hand over the hole in my arm. "Stubborn prick son of a bitch. I'm not one to argue about PTSD. So, I shoulda known you'd do something so fucking stupid."

The nurse had grabbed a handful of gauze and shoved it into Doc's open hand. He was none too gentle when he pushed it over my bleeding arm. Alex again grabbed gloves from the box on the wall, pulling them on quicker than I could've imagined.

Moving Doc out of the way. The nurse peeled back the bloody gauze, piled on cotton then put several strips of tape

over it. I could tell by the look on his face, he was angry, but not surprised. To his credit he didn't say a word. After fixing up my arm, he pulled off the gloves, tossing them into the trash can.

“Well, people tell me that I'm dramatic, but you, Mister Anderson, have me beat. And now the housekeeping staff will have to clean up that mess, and brother let me tell you, they are going to give me hell. I'm going to send you the bill for my therapy.” Alex was typing something on the electronic device.

“Okay, the doctor has signed off and I'm going to the nurse's station to grab your discharge papers. You can get dressed and I'll be back with a wheelchair and before you start your bitching,” Alex gave me a stern look. “Yes, you have to ride in it, no I won't reconsider, and you can't talk me out of it. It's my job on the line. I'll be back.”

Doc watched the nurse leave. “I know you're struggling, Viking, but that was stupid.”

I could hear his anger. I didn't give a shit. “You aren't in my shoes, Doc. I feel as if my skin is going to split.”

Alex walked in pushing the chair. His face told me that arguing would be useless. He handed me the tablet and showed me where to use my finger to sign on the electronic device. He huffed. “Here's your prescriptions. Alright, hop in and enjoy the ride. And may I say, good riddance, my overly dramatic friend.”

What the fuck ever. If riding like an invalid got me out of the ER, I'd take it. As he wheeled me out, I knew I couldn't keep burying my past. I made a decision.

“Doc.” I looked up to the man who had become my best friend. “I'm going home, and I want you to come with me.”

# Chapter Two - Diana

Present Day



I HAVE NEVER been so out of my element. I graduated from Van High School. Our largest graduation class had dozens, not hundreds of kids. The town has a pharmacy, bank, a flower shop, one gas station, and a pizza shop. We have more churches than businesses there. It's so tiny, we don't even have a stop sign.

When I watched television shows about 'small towns,' I always scoffed when I heard, "With ten thousand people and one stop light, everyone knows everyone else." Van, West Virginia had around two hundred people in the entire town. We really *did* know everyone. And every person you met either worked or had family working in the coal mines.

All my life, I had come to Charleston for one reason or another. Mostly to shop, watch movies, see an event at the Coliseum, or go to the Clay Center. More than once, I visited my grandmother at CAMC hospital. I honestly had no idea how scary the capital city could be at night. Especially when I was alone.

September weather was warm during the day, but the nights were in the fifties. I put my hands in the pocket of my hoodie glancing at the overcast sky. It looked like rain, and I didn't know what I was going to do. Every minute counted while looking for Mariska. Rain would empty the streets except for the hard-core drug users and prostitutes.



Also, if I got wet, I had no place to get dry. I had run through most of my savings with hotel and food costs, so I had to cut back. Sleeping in my car meant nowhere to undress or let my clothes dry out. Again, the nights were getting colder and there wasn't a place to park and sleep where the police didn't run me off. I was tired and 'running on fumes' as my gran would say.

Although I was scared to approach strangers, I had come a long way since I arrived here several weeks ago. When my niece, Mariska disappeared, no one seemed to have the same sense of urgency I had.

The Boone County police were positive she was a 'runaway' and she hopped a bus while in the city. I made it my mission to find her. When I first got to Charleston, only my love for Mariska gave me the courage to go up to strangers and show them her picture.

Many hadn't seen her, a few thought she looked familiar but couldn't say for certain if it was her. One street veteran told me where the YMCA was, so I could ask the staff or the homeless who used it as a shelter at night. Since I was basically homeless now, it was also a place for me to shower and change my clothes.

I was cold, my toes felt like ice, and my legs hurt from walking all day. Before being forced to take refuge in my car, I needed to hurry and ask as many people as possible about my niece.

I saw a group of young men standing beside a bar. Something warned me to not go near them, but my concern for Mariska pushed aside common sense.

The four guys were maybe in their early twenties, wearing artfully ripped jeans, name brand t-shirts, and smug attitudes. As I neared them, my heart beat a little too fast. At the last second, I decided to keep walking and pretend not to notice them. Just as I got within a few feet, I crossed the road to avoid getting any closer.

Chills went down my spine when their laughing and joking suddenly stopped. The street became quiet and the hair on the

back of my neck stood. As I neared the middle of the two-lane street, I felt like I was being hunted so I picked up the pace.

Relief hit me when I noticed the all-night diner. I quickly ducked inside. Nearly deserted, I moved to a table away from the door, and sat down. Licking my lips, I willed my heart to slow and my body to stop shaking.

In Van, I had never feared approaching anyone. A group of mean girls in high school was the worst thing I'd ever encountered, but here I had to quickly develop my instincts. Seeing those men, even though they appeared to have money, gave off creepy vibes. All the overpriced clothes, expensive haircuts, and artificially tanned skin couldn't hide their intentions.

The waitress came to my table. The older woman looked worn out from serving the public all day. Since I worked in retail, I knew how frustrating it could be. I said a silent prayer that I'd have enough money to give her a decent tip.

Mentally counting the amount I had in my pocket, I ordered a plain ham sandwich and a small soda. Something told me to take my time to let the guys move on. I needed to come up with a new plan anyway.

Money was becoming an issue. If I didn't find Mariska soon, I'd have to give up and go home, or find a job here in Charleston. Technically, I only lived about an hour away. I could have stayed home and come to town every chance I got but, I wanted to devote all my time looking for my niece.

I'd helped raise her with my sister. Bella's husband ditched them when Mariska was still in diapers. We lost track of him after he signed away his parental rights along with the divorce papers. For all I knew, he could be dead.

As the older sister, I couldn't let her take on motherhood alone. We rented a house and both of us worked to pay bills. At first we juggled shifts at a twenty-four hour gas station. I ended up working in the cafeteria at the high school.

One of us was always home to care for Mariska when she was a toddler. After my niece got into middle school, my sister

went back to college part time and was just a few months from graduation with her registered nursing degree.

My sister and I both came to Charleston the day Mariska didn't come home. Her friends had called Bella, and we jumped in the car. We prayed all the way there they were wrong, and that she was hiding somewhere in the mall. It wasn't like Mariska, but her playing a terrible practical joke beat thinking she was taken.

Bella was in the middle of her last semester. It took me forever, but I talked her into letting me stay in town until she took her finals. I told her that maybe Mariska would come home, and someone should be there. She would still call me every night to check on me and see if I learned anything new. I tried to give her positive updates, but I was running out of things to say.

Since it was summer break, I gave up a management position at Exxon. The pay was decent, and helped fill the gap when I wasn't cooking during the school year. But now that school was in session, I'd probably lose that job too.

Besides, I couldn't justify the hour-long trip to Charleston every day, search the town, drive an hour home, and still get rest. I just had to figure out how to balance what was left of my savings. Money wasn't as important as Mariska.

Even though money was tight, I would die before asking my controlling parents for cash. Besides, they had begged Bella not to marry Mariska's father. Tension was high between the four of us. Since they were retired and living in Florida now, I wasn't even sure my sister told them what was happening.

I pulled out my cell phone looking over the notes I'd made. Mariska was sixteen but hadn't yet gotten her license to drive. With all her friends taking her wherever she wanted, Mariska didn't act too eager to get them. Popular at school, and active on the school softball team, she had no reason to run away.

Nothing about her being gone made sense, and I refused to believe the worst. My mind wouldn't allow it.

My sister was beside herself with grief and guilt. She had let her daughter come to Charleston with her friends to shop for school clothes. It was the first time Mariska had come to town without one of us.

Her friends said she had entered a dressing room but never came out. They waited, then knocked, but got no answer. After waiting a little longer, they had a store clerk unlock the door, but it was empty. Charleston PD and Boone County cops were working on the case, but made it clear they had no more leads.

My phone battery was getting low, and I noticed an outlet close by. I pulled out the cord to ask if I could charge while I ate. The waitress carried my order from the back and put it on the table. She nodded before I could say anything. Reaching over I plugged it in.

“Excuse me,” I looked at her name tag. “Lottie. I know you’re busy and you’ve probably had a long day, but I have a photo of my niece. She went missing from the Town Center Mall several weeks ago. Have you seen her?” I pulled out the picture. I was afraid the woman would be too tired or disinterested to care.

“Well, we do get a lot of business from runaways and such. Let me take a look.” Lottie pulled up a pair of glasses that hung from a chain and slid them over her thin nose. She sat at the table while she studied the photo. “Honestly, not many girls that are this naturally pretty come in here. If they were at one time, the street changes their looks real quick.”

I shifted in my seat, fear for my niece had me nibbling at my chapped lips. “She was trying on clothes. Her friends swear they never left the area so she didn’t slip out, but the dressing room door was locked. Mariska was nowhere to be found.”

Lottie’s eyes shot from the photo to mine. I could see her swallow hard.

“Please. I can see by the look on your face something’s not right. You know she needs help. Help me help her.” My heart was pounding in my chest.

“Honey, if your niece has gotten tangled up in what I’m a thinkin’, you’re gonna need a lot of help and not the kind that you get when you call nine one one.” Lottie laid Mariska’s picture on the table and pushed it toward me. Taking off her glasses I could see her fighting with her conscience. “Back when she disappeared, there was still an active trafficking ring. They were big around here, taking girls. It was all over the news, surely you saw it.”

My body started to shake. It was my worst fear and one I tried to put from my mind. Hearing the waitress confirm my worst fears was almost more than I could stand. “Oh, God.” The ham sandwich didn’t look appealing anymore. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t give up on her. She’s only sixteen. Mariska’s never even had a boyfriend.”

The older woman put her warm hand over my cold one. “My sister, she owned a bar that a motorcycle club ran. She was killed about a year ago by the same men who might have your niece. Janet, my little sister, had a mean streak a mile wide and a heart twice as big. I miss her so much.”

Lottie laughed and shook her head. “She took me to Blades Bar once. You know I saw her take down a drunk biker who was at least twice her weight and a foot taller than her. Within minutes he was on his knees, blubbering like a baby and begging her to stop hurting him.” She shed a tear but was smiling at the memory. She sobered and clasped her hands together on the table.

“I can’t help you, myself, but I can give you a place to stay for a few days. I’ve seen you walking around the city. I’ve also seen you getting in your car at night. Working here I get to know all the street people and I know when someone is homeless. The fatigue and weariness in your eyes say it all.”

She stood and looked outside. “I get off in an hour, so you just take your time eating that sandwich. Those four pricks seem to have moved on. One day, those thug wannabes will come across the wrong people and *they’ll* end up on their knees begging for someone to stop hurting them.”

## Chapter Three – Viking



“HEY BOSS, THE guys are restless and horny. I’m tired of their short fuses and them breaking shit by fighting.” Brass, my Road Captain stood in the doorway of my room. He didn’t bother knocking, and he didn’t seem to care that I was naked, my junk flopped over my thigh. “We just fixed the goddamn hole in the wall that Tiny made, now we have to do it again. I’m taking their mangey asses to Silver Angels to let off steam. You want to come along?”

A few months ago, I moved my stuff from my house to a room above the clubhouse. Eagle, one of my crew, had claimed an old lady and needed privacy. I let him have my house since I’d never have a permanent bitch. Problem was, everyone thought I was *always* open for club business. Because I was Prez, I was.

Since I was finished here, heading to Charleston sounded good to me. I slapped the bare ass of the bitch lying in my bed. She gave a delighted squeal. Her sexy attitude changed when I replied, “Sure, I’ll ride to town.”

The woman, one of my club’s bitches, trailed her fingers up my thigh. “Stay here. I’m not finished with you yet, Viking.”

Previously, I made it a practice to never fuck any bitch under my protection. She reminded me of why when she stuck out her bottom lip. Her fake pouting pissed me off.

No one woman would ever think they’d wear my property patch just because I dipped my wick inside her pussy. I didn’t want to give her the idea that she was becoming my old lady,

or that she now held special status. I had to make it clear this was nothing to me. She just helped me scratch an itch.

“Get up.” I growled. “Come back and change the sheets and clean up my room after I’m gone. Brass, toss me my jeans.”

My road captain watched the naked club bitch storm out of my room with a grin on his face. “Nancy looked ready to murder you.”

His words jogged my memory. Nancy had been the old lady to the enforcer of the Soulless Bastards. No wonder she was put out by my dismissal of her. She was used to being a high-ranking bitch. Maybe she planned on upping that title by hooking up with me. I had just gotten a quick reminder of why my hand was better than dealing with bitch politics.

Double Barrell, my Veep, was usually in charge of the women under our protection. More power to him, I’d rather scrape my eyeballs with a rusty fork.

Macy and Galinda were the names of the other two wild ones. I hardly messed with the females in my MC. I was better off picking up women outside the club. No matter how horny I became, I’d never make this same mistake. I better check Amazon for an industrial size bottle of lube.

I looked up to my Road Captain. “I think she’s still mad that some of the strippers at Silver Angels kicked her ass once. Trust me, the next time she wants something, or tries to fuck me, she’ll get over it.”

“At least you get your pick of the club bitches. The rest of us have to compete with that president patch on your cut.”

I huffed in irritation. “A moment of weakness on my part. That right there,” I pointed to the doorway Nancy had exited, “is why I usually steer clear. Tell me the last time you’ve seen one of our women leave my bed.”

Brass shrugged. “It’s not like I pay attention to any action you get, Viking.”

I pulled on my clean underwear and jeans, looking around for the socks I’d stripped off. I spotted them half under the bed

and bent to put them on.

There were two good things that came from the trip to the strip club. First, I was all for getting the rowdy out of my crew. Second, the girls working there were prime eye candy, and they knew how to treat their customers.

My boys had been through a lot and deserved some down time. Since coming to West Virginia, the Merciless Few MC had an active year. I was ready for some peace and quiet myself. We had barely hit town when we wiped out the Soulless Bastards and took over the compound.

The club inherited a few of their widowed old ladies, like the one I had just dismissed. Initially, they were like wild, rabid dogs, so we referred to them as the 'wild ones'. One woman actually tried to bite Double Barrel the first time he met them. Another tried to stab Eagle when he took them food.

At first, to help keep them from killing us in our sleep, I assigned two men to guard them day in and day out. It got to the point that I threatened Doc would keep them sedated if they didn't stop the violent shit.

Eventually, after a few months of us not beating the shit out of them, they started to settle down. Then again, it might have been the warning of sending them to different MFMC chapters across the country. No other club would treat them with the same kindness we had. That helped calm their boiling hate to a simmer.

A year later, and they still acted up now and again. It reminded me of a dog pulling on a leash to test their owner's limits. I was about to lose my patience though. Women were wanting to hang out at our club now, we didn't need troublemakers. Like I said, peace and quiet was something I craved.

After taking over the Soulless Bastard's territory, we helped the Black Daggers kill human traffickers and rescue girls being held in an abandoned office building. Due to some unfortunate circumstances, we let the entire MC hole up with us until their new compound was built. As a result, we were



welcomed at their bar, Blades, and their strip club, Silver Angels.

I scoffed as I pulled on my riding boots. “Nancy just beat it into my thick head why I’ll never be so stupid again. A nice piece of ass isn’t worth the trouble, no matter how horny I get. We both know she’s hoping to manipulate things to become the head bitch. Right now, Heather is doing a good job overseeing the women.”

“I wonder if Heather misses the tips she made dancing?” He shrugged, dismissing his own thoughts. “Come on, let’s head on over to town. I’m ready for cold beer in frosted mugs and to watch some hot chicks shake their tits in my face.”

I finished slipping on a clean shirt and my cut. “I’m ready for a change of scenery myself.”

“I hear ya, brother.” Brass grinned and punched my shoulder.

When I left, I assigned Sampson, my enforcer, and the prospects to watch over the wild ones. They still had days where they pushed my limits. I wanted to enjoy my time away from the compound, and not worry about their shenanigans.

My body relaxed as I walked toward my bike. Straddling the seat of my hog, goosebumps broke out. I took a moment to enjoy the anticipation of firing it up. After all these years, riding never got old.

I pulled out first, the rest of the MC fell in line according to rank. Since we didn’t take the interstate, the trip to Charleston was miles of winding two lane roads. It took thirty minutes of riding through beautiful green hills and rural towns to reach city limits. I hadn’t realized until I moved back home how much I missed these mountains.

Night was just falling when we hit town. I enjoyed watching the faces of the people on the sidewalks when we’d roll past them. Some pretended we weren’t there, while others were obviously afraid. More than a few women looked at us with hunger in their eyes. From sixteen to sixty, they all

wanted a bad boy between their thighs. They'd never admit it to their friends, but none of us missed those heated glances.

We pulled around behind the building and parked our bikes. The bass beat of the dancer's music could be heard after the engines shut down. My crew were already looking more relaxed.

Beast, the bouncer, smiled as we entered the club. I stopped to talk to the behemoth while my crew headed toward the stage.

"Hey, man. Guys were a little restless at the compound. Thought getting their rocks off would settle them a bit."

Beast nodded. "Nothing like the soft touch of a woman to calm the beast. No pun intended. How's Star doing?"

He was referring to Heather, who had quit using her stage name since leaving the strip club. "She's great. Keeps the wild ones and the new influx of women in line."

"She learned from the best. Janet was small but mighty." A look of grief briefly passed over his face.

I gave him my condolences by bro-slapping him on the back. "Take it easy, man. I'm thirsty and going to head to the bar." I scanned the room, noticing a few fresh faces, my eyebrows raising. "Wait. Looks like you got new bitches. Young ones."

"Yeah," He pointed at the new females, "those three are mamas, that one is a house mouse since she's so young. Runaways, man. Camp won't let them dance or serve alcohol. That's why the mamas and the girl under twenty-one wear black shirts so everyone knows they are off limits. They bus the tables, and *no one* is allowed to touch them." Beast shook his head. "I can't imagine how bad it must've been for them at home if living on the street is better. "

I had to admire the prez of the Black Daggers. He kept his women protected, but then again, his old lady, Rachel would cut off his balls if he didn't. One reason I was glad I didn't have to answer to a woman, I liked my balls just where they

were. Besides, I'd lost my chance at happiness a long time ago.

“Letting them earn money while keeping them from the dangers of the street helps them get back on their feet. My guys will stay away from the off-limit women, but don't be afraid to knock their heads together if they don't follow the rules. I doubt you'll have to though, they're more into the fake tits the dancers have anyway.”

Beast grinned but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Growling, he took off when he saw one of the dancers struggling with a customer. The dumbass wasn't wearing a cut, so he didn't belong to an MC. If he did, his prez would knock sense into him. As it was, Beast was going to kick his ass before he tossed the offender out the door. Literally.

I didn't bother to watch Beast manhandle the handsy patron. My mouth was watering for a mug of frosty beer. Since their original bar was destroyed a year or so ago, the Black Dagger MC rebuilt the bar onto their strip club. Anyone could patronize the exotic dance side of the business, but you had to be a bona fide MC member to get into Blades.

Prospects stood guard over both entrances, making sure only members came in. I entered through the Silver Angels doorway. The other was open to the street. I'd been in many bars since I was sixteen, but this newly built Blades was fantastic.

Dodge wasn't just an enforcer for the Black Dagger MC, but also owned a construction company. His crew was well known to do Grade A work, and Blades was the proverbial jewel in his crown. It was bigger than the original, too. With building their compound, it would've been easy to cut corners here, but that wasn't the case.

The bar itself was brand new wood, but Dodge had made it look like a well-cared for antique. The stools were padded and comfortable, which was an important luxury for asses that put miles on a bike.

Tables and chairs were placed far enough apart for private conversations, a stage where live bands would perform, and a

jukebox for old guys like me to look at and reminisce. There were even two pool tables that a member of Dodge's crew made.

I spotted an empty place at the bar and parked my ass on the stool. I raised my hand in the air, my forefinger extended to get the bartender's attention. It seemed wrong somehow, to not see Janet pulling beers. After setting two mugs on a tray for a server, the woman headed my way.

"Do you have a tab here?" She wiped the bar top with a rag before laying down a coaster that had the Blades Bar logo printed on it. "Or are you paying cash?"

"Cash." I pulled out my wallet then slapped a ten on the counter and winked. "House draft, keep the change."

The woman smiled. "Names Callie. I'll be back with your beer."

It didn't take long for her to fill the mug, but she gave me a look before jotting something down on a napkin. She sashayed her pert little ass my way placing the frosted mug on the coaster, then slid the napkin in my hand. I looked down to find the words, "*I'm on break in half an hour if you're interested.*"

I reached out and gently rubbed my fingers across the back of her hand. "I don't plan on leaving."

Callie bit her bottom lip. "I'll know where to find you."

"Looking forward to it." I grinned when she leaned forward and motioned for me to move closer.

"Me too." She bit my earlobe then walked away when someone called for a refill.

"You're the luckiest son of a bitch in the place." Hoss, a freshly patched Dagger sat next to me. His cut was so new, it was still shiny, and the front only contained his name patch. He was nearly as big as Beast but had an even younger appearance than the twenty-two-year-old bouncer. Fuck, lately, everyone looked like youngsters to me. Suddenly the beer didn't have enough alcohol content.

Hoss continued speaking, unaware of my existential crisis. “Every Dagger around here has been trying to get into her perfectly filled out jeans since Callie started working here. Hell, I’d be happy just to finger fuck her.”

I sipped my beer and licked my top lip. “It’s all about respect, man. I didn’t leer at her or make crude comments. I may have thought them, but I didn’t blurt them out the second I had her in front of me. Most young bucks have a tendency to come on strong and heavy. Club bitches might be easier to bed for the ranking members, but those women might still slit the throats of guys who treat her like shit.”

The younger guy nodded. “Huh. Never thought about it that way. I always thought the women were here to get fucked, you know? Figured when I got my patch, I could take my pick. Camp makes sure we don’t hurt anybody, but as far as how to pick up chicks, we’re on our own.”

If I had a mouthful of beer, I would’ve done a spit take. Camp’s job over the MC wasn’t to be a father to the men, but run the club as a whole. “Glad to help. Respect is never the wrong answer.” I slapped him on the shoulder just as he turned and headed toward the strip joint.

“That’s why you’re the prez of your own club.” Camp plopped his ass in the recently vacated seat next to me. “I swear this young group of boys have no common sense. They pass the prospect tests, they’re loyal as a hound, but damn, they have rocks for brains.”

It seemed I wasn’t the only one who felt like life was moving faster than I could keep up with. Suddenly, I saw myself sitting in a rocking chair screaming at kids to get off my lawn.

I sighed. “Yeah, this is the same generation that thinks sending unsolicited dick pics to a woman is a good thing.” I clinked my nearly empty mug against Camp’s then finished it off with a gulp. “Been thinking about setting up a few businesses closer to Beckley. My guys are getting tired of working on the compound and need something to keep them out of trouble. Like you said, head full of rocks.”

Camp grinned. He'd just retired as a firefighter after hitting his twenty plus years in the Charleston Fire Department. Age meant little with all the shitty life experiences I had. At forty-five he was close to my age, but I felt like I was well over sixty.

“God, to be that young and full of piss and vigor. I could fuck two girls back-to-back and still have a raging hard on. Youth is wasted on the young.” Camp tipped his mug and finished his beer.

“Preach, brother.” I leaned forward, waving to Callie for a refill. “It has to help that you got a young, hot old lady though.”

“Oh, it sure as fuck does. I haven't been this horny since I was in my twenties. Something to be said for perky tits, a tight bouncy ass, and the sass of a pissed off cat.” He looked up and smiled. “Speaking of, here comes my Little Warrior now.”

I watched as his Old Lady, a striking blonde in tight jeans and even tighter Blades t-shirt, strolled over to Camp. Her eyes were trained on her man, a wicked smile on her face. She never said a word, just slid between his parted thighs and ran her hands up his body until she circled her arms around his neck.

Part of me wanted to be jealous of my fellow club president. The rest of me rebelled at the idea of any one woman having that much emotional or physical control over me. Sex is like smiling, the more you share it with others, the happier everyone is.

I glanced over to the couple making out like teenagers beside me. Camp had his hands on Rachel's ass holding her tight as he humped against her. If they kept this up, they'd end up in the infamous 'dark corner', fucking for everyone to watch.

Glancing in that direction, I saw a biker was already there, getting head. Several men in cuts were watching and shouting encouragement. I grinned. I was glad they kept this tradition from the original Blades.

Rachel and Camp headed to his office just as Callie leaned over the bar. Her eyes strayed to the couple in the dark corner. “Looks like Crazy Pete found someone willing to take on his kind of insanity. Good for him.” She rounded the bar, coming to stand beside me. “Now, how about you and I find a more private place to hang out for the next thirty minutes.”

Taking my hand, she led me to the supply closet at the end of the bar. She was stacked like a brick shithouse. “I don’t mind watching, but I don’t want to be part of the show.”

Pushing her against the door, I slid one hand to her waist, the other to her generous breast, pinching her hard nipple through her clothes. “Whatever makes you comfortable, Callie.”

She grinned as she turned the knob, both of us tumbled inside. I grabbed a metal shelf to keep from falling on top of the sexy bartender. I kicked the door shut as she flipped a switch, turning on a single lightbulb.

I felt her hands move to the button of my jeans popping it open. Her warm fingers slid between my skin and underwear, wrapping around my cock. “Big boy. Can I suck it before you roll on a condom?”

“Hell yeah. Drop to your knees.” I watched her eyes to find out if she liked being bossed around or not. She definitely did. Pushing my jeans and underwear to my knees, I grabbed my hard on and slapped her mouth a few times, leaving wet sticky precum glistening on her lips.

My eyes rolled back in my head when she swallowed me almost to the root. I felt her gag before she backed off. “Damn. That’s a good mouth you got on you, girl.”

I was glad I’d gotten off with Nancy earlier, because Callie could suck a bowling ball through a garden hose. I allowed myself to come close several times before I pulled her up to stand. I turned her around to face away from me, undid her jeans and pushed them to her ankles as I dropped to my knees behind her.

“Nasty girl. No panties.” I bit her left cheek as I slid my fingers over her swollen clit. “So fucking wet.” I played with her until she cried out, then reached for my wallet. Pulling out a condom, I watched her as she fingered herself, using her wet digits to play with her asshole.

“If I had time to prep you, I’d fuck your tight ass.” I stood and pushed between her shoulder blades. She willingly bent until her hands braced on a five-gallon bucket. Slapping her ass hard, until I heard her moan, I took my time pushing into her hot, tight pussy.

I started slowly, but she began to push back, silently begging for more. Happy to oblige, I held her tight and fucked her hard and fast. The wet sounds of me slamming into her filled the small room. I spit on her hole and ran the rough pad of my thumb over it, dipping in enough to make her gasp.

Her deft fingers found my ball sac, fondling it until they were drawn tight, and I was riding the edge of my orgasm. Her fingernails raked across my taint adding just enough pain to send me over the edge.

I held her hips in a bruising grip as I emptied my spunk into the condom. Her pussy tightened around my spasming cock, milking me until I was almost too sensitive. My grip tightened to hold her still until my dick began to soften.

Reaching between our bodies, I held the condom as I pulled out. Quickly tying it off, I reached over to the shelf grabbing a paper napkin. Callie stood and dressed before I could blink. She looked at my half hard cock, grinned then took the paper wrapped condom. “I’ll take care of that. It’s the least I could do for that fantastic stress relief.”

When she walked out without so much as a backward glance, I sighed in relief. No kiss, no hug, no mention of a next time. It was a quick simple fuck for both of us and that was it. Tucking my dick back into my pants I quickly righted my clothes. Fucking made me thirsty, and the next mug of beer was calling my name.

I opened the door from the stuffy little closet that now smelled like sex, when I bumped into my Veep, Double Barrel.



“The guys that went out to smoke thought they heard a woman scream. Do you want to check it out?”

“Yeah, let’s head out.”

Just as we hit the sidewalk, I heard a blood curdling cry for help. My crew took off in a run toward the sound. I rounded the corner to an alley just in time to see a woman get backhanded and fall to the ground.

I saw red.

## Chapter Four - Diana



WHEN LOTTIE INVITED me to stay at her house, my hunger returned full force. Her kindness and the fact I'd be safe while I slept gave me hope for the first time since Mariska went missing.

I finished the sandwich while looking out the window as the rain showers dwindled to a sprinkle. I needed to get my car and drive it to her house so it wouldn't be ticketed. Some areas had parking meters that were free from five at night to eight in the morning. Those were hard to find where I was currently searching, so I had a few blocks to walk.

I won't lie, my heart was pounding as I approached the glass door. I didn't know if I had the fortitude to walk out there in the dark after those four dicks made it clear I was their intended target.

The car wasn't going to move itself. I wished it would.

Taking a deep breath, I steeled my courage. If I was going to stay in town and look for Mariska, I needed to move past this fear. "Lottie," I called out to the woman, hoping I'd convince myself that I believed what I was going to say was true. "I'll be back in a few minutes, then I'll wait for your shift to end and to follow you to your house."

It was quiet, as I stepped outside. The only sounds I heard was a car driving a few streets over, and water dripping from streetlamps and store awnings. What should have been a peaceful night stroll, was anything but. It was like my head was on a swivel as I looked around me, trying to hear any footsteps close by.

Remembering something I read online, I pulled the keys from my pocket, placing the metal between my fingers and closing my hand to make a fist. Wolverine I was not, but I felt better having some sort of weapon.

I walked quickly, but I tried to put off an air of confidence that I definitely did not feel. Funny how a small incident could trigger such anxiety. I'd been searching for my niece for a few weeks without issue.

Sure, at first I was timid and hesitant, but no one threatened me or implied they would do so. The worst attitude I'd gotten was apathy. Now, I felt vulnerable and...stalked. All because four twenty-something jerks decided to harass me.

My footsteps sounded loud to my ears as I moved up the street. To stay calm, I counted steps from building to building. Once I finished the first block, I glanced in all directions before crossing the road.

Movement from my right, across the street caught my eye. I tried to maintain my pace, praying that it was just some random person going about their own business. Two more blocks. That's all I had left. I just needed to cross two more streets before turning left to be near my car.

I jerked when a sharp whistle came from behind me, but I didn't stop moving. My breaths were coming as fast as my heartbeat. If I didn't control myself, I'd hyperventilate. I turned my head quickly. A woman ran from a building into the arms of someone. My shoulders slumped in relief.

I could see the corner where I needed to hang left then go half a block to my car. I licked my lips, which didn't help since my tongue was just as dry. Crossing at the last intersection, I sighed in relief when my car came into view. It was under a large streetlight, too. I must have let my guard down.

Sudden movement from between buildings caught my attention, but too late. Two sets of hands grabbed me. One from my right, to wrap around my waist. The other from the left, around my mouth. My body went completely stiff. I couldn't fight, I couldn't scream. It was like I was frozen.

The sound of laughter and music was coming from somewhere close, but I was being dragged down an alley. No one would see what was happening to me, and the noise of revelry could hide my screams. As my captor released his hand from my face the smell of urine and vomit along with my fear, had bile rushing to my mouth.

No words were said, only hands pulling at my clothes, ripping my t-shirt in the process. My body wasn't responding, until my survival instinct kicked in. I remembered the keys in my right hand. I brought my fist up quickly. The back of the key bit into my palm as the metal caught the man on the cheek. Time seemed to move in slow motion as I watched blood well up and roll down his face. Big, fat droplets splattered against my arm.

I heard a scream and wasn't sure if it was mine or the man I had just injured. The attacker began to swing wildly in what my family referred to as haymakers. I used my forearms to block his meaty fists from landing. Each blow felt like a brick.

Suddenly, from behind, the second man wrapped his arms around me, pinning me against him and my arms to my sides.

The man's hand drew back. I couldn't tell if he had a brick or his fist was huge. I knew he'd kill me if he hit me. I raised my right knee as hard as I could. I was sure I hit my spot, but my body went totally limp when a hard object connected with my jaw.

Behind me, the attacker holding me grunted with the sudden dead weight. We both fell backward. A whoosh of air was forced from his lungs when his back hit the building.

He was trapped between me and the hard cinder block. I saw stars when the back of my head impacted his chin. My legs couldn't hold us both up as he started to slide toward the ground. Once his arms went lax, I fell forward.

Even through my denim, my knees burned from hitting the pavement as my right ankle buckled. Landing on my outstretched hand. I heard a crack. I cried out at the agony that raced from my wrist up my arm.

The man I had cut, grabbed my hair and tugged me toward him. The blinding pain from my wrist, legs and head, pulled a scream from me. To my own ears it sounded inhuman. It shocked my attacker momentarily causing him to release his hold. My long hair was wrapped around his fingers. I screamed again when several clumps were ripped from my head as he jerked backward.

My throat was raw, my jaw was swelling from the impact of his earlier strike. Woozy from the rush of adrenaline, agony, and fear, I had barely righted myself. I moved to avoid him grabbing at me then used my left hand to punch toward his groin. I didn't stay to see if I was successful. As quick as I could, I turned to crawl away. I hoped to gain my footing and run.

The man who had been trapped when I nearly passed out, grabbed my left calf. The urge to flee hit me hard. Using my other foot I kicked back, contacting his face. I felt the impact against my foot. Pain exploded from my injured right ankle. I heard his shout as his fingers loosened their hold.

Scrambling forward, my right wrist crumpled. I lost my chance to get away. I had just enough strength to yell for help when I was pulled up and backhanded hard. Blood filled my mouth. The world tilted as I collapsed.

The echo of my head hitting the concrete was something I'll never forget. It sounded just like when I was a kid, and I dropped a watermelon in our driveway. The hollow thud momentarily drowned out everything else. I don't know how long I lay there, with my ears ringing.

By the time I got myself together enough to try and sit up, I heard fists hitting flesh. Rolling to my left side I started to push myself up and look toward the noise of the fight. Blood was running down my face, and my mouth was also full of it.

If I live to be one hundred, I will always remember the sight of a blond-haired man in a black vest holding one of my attackers up by his shirt with his left hand, while he pummeled the guy's face with his right fist. The man on the ground was being held in place by a bald guy in a similar vest. His huge

black boot was positioned in the middle of my other attacker's chest while a gun was pointed at his head.

"Careful, Viking. You might kill him." The man with the gun didn't sound to upset by the fact.

Once the blond guy, Viking, tossed the unconscious man to the ground, he picked up the second one. I watched him frown as he gave the man a shake, bouncing his head like a rag doll. "Pathetic chickenshit fainted." Raring back his right hand he punched the unconscious man in the face. I heard a loud pop just before blood gushed from my second attacker's nose.

Wiping his hand on the dude's shirt, Viking dropped the second man to land on my other attacker. "DB, clean up this mess. Brass, get a hold of Doc." He looked at me and grimaced. "Tell him to hurry."

"Viking," the man who held the gun on my attacker bent down. I heard the jingle of my keys. "She has a cage."

"There's just a few cars on the street." He turned to someone I didn't see, holding out my keys. "Find it. Brass, tell Doc he's going to ride back to the compound with her to do what he can to help her on the way there. And, ask Camp if it's cool to leave Doc's and my bikes. We'll get them tomorrow."

My body was going into shock. I could feel it starting to shake and my breathing grew labored. I was going to pass out. The last words I heard uttered were, "Well, fuck. Razor, catch her before she hits her head again."

## Chapter Five - Viking



THE SHAPELY BEAUTY never opened her eyes as I drove us back to the compound. By the injuries I could see, those two fuckers did a job on her. I didn't know too much about her, but from the looks of her car, she was homeless. I was only able to speculate about what went on in the alley.

I did find her driver's license stuffed under the seat. Diana Taylor from the small town of Van. She was thirty-eight, her birthday just a week ago. Brown hair, green eyes, those things I noticed on my own. I didn't look at her weight, but I could see all those gorgeous curves of hers.

"How's she doing, Doc?" I glanced in the rear-view mirror. She was lying on the backseat. Doc was on his knees between the seats. He was in a pretty tight space but didn't seem to mind.

"Well, she's not got any broken bones that I can find, although she might have a concussion. Her right wrist is badly swollen, but I think it's a major sprain. Same thing for the jaw, swollen and not broken." Doc turned his head so I could see his face. "That knot on her head where she hit the ground looks nasty, but it's not caved in so that's a plus. I don't see needle tracks on her arms or between her fingers, but she looks too healthy to be shooting up anyway."

"I thought the same." She didn't have the look of a drug addict trying to score. I couldn't imagine she was a prostitute, unless she just started working the street. She looked too innocent to have been out here for long.

Not that I judged them.

Women had to do what it took to survive, and I respected them for it. But women used to fending for themselves had a hardened edge, Diana didn't have that.

“Those fuckers didn't seem to know her, so it probably wasn't a domestic thing. Do you think she'll come around by the time we get her back to the compound?” I seriously doubted it. She had some major injuries. Even with all the blood and swelling, she was still one of the most beautiful women I'd seen. A woman as pretty as her could be a professional model.

“I hope not.” Doc sounded concerned. “I don't have my bag here and she's going to be in pain. She might need an IV too. Going by her lips and feel of her skin, she's dehydrated. Been living in the car for a bit, but she's not been on the street long, just enough for it to now start impacting her health.”

My heart went out to her. My musing was interrupted by Doc's continued rambling. “Once we get her back to the compound, I'll get some of the women to get her undressed and into some comfortable clothes. I think we have a few guys with clothes that would be big on her.”

I wanted to slam on the breaks. No one else's clothes would be on Diana. I wasn't going to stop and question myself. I had rescued her, she was going to be in my clubhouse, so she was my responsibility, that's all it was. I was the prez, so she was going to have my room, my clothes, stay in my fucking bed. Doc never said a word when I told him as much.

The motion activated spotlights came on as I pulled into the entrance to the compound. We had moved the guard shack from its previous location to the edge of the mile-long dirt road. Two prospects came forward, hands on their sidearms. Even though I was concerned about the unconscious woman in the back, I was proud of the way they protected our home.

I was in a car, and one the men didn't recognize. They separated to flank the vehicle. One, Franks, moved toward the passenger side, the other, Walker to mine. They stayed alert,



ready to pull their guns if needed. Through the tint, I watched them approach in the way they'd been trained.

When I rolled down my window, the prospects drew their guns but kept them low. I knew the minute Walker recognized me. He raised his hand, palm up, to Franks. It wasn't a signal everything was good, but to stand ready. My damn chest swelled at how well these new guys were performing. I turned on the dome light so they could see inside.

"Good evening, Viking." He glanced inside the car. "Nice cage. How's it hangin'?"

That was the agreed upon question to ask for the password. One wrong word from me, and the boys would've shot the fuck out of the car knowing I was being forced to enter the compound. "Paper moon."

Both men relaxed. Walker moved closer looking in the back. "Do you need me to call for a couple of the guys to help move her inside?"

"Thanks, Walker, but Doc and I got this."

"Easy for you to say, you haven't been kneeling in a cramped space for the last half hour. Walker, tell Sampson to meet us at the door." Doc tried to move around but cussed a blue streak instead. "She needs to be moved carefully to not worsen her injuries. The more guys that can move her the better."

Walker looked to me for final permission to contact the enforcer. When I nodded, he said, "You got it, Doc." He motioned to Franks who holstered his sidearm and pulled out his cell.

I drove down the rutted road carefully, not wanting to jostle Diana too much. "We need to get the guys on fixing this damn road." Doc never replied to my bitching. The trip seemed to take twice as long as normal. By the time I pulled up to the club house, Diana let out a moan of pain.

The door to the club opened and Sampson strolled out. He was a big son of a bitch. Part of the reason I picked him to be the club enforcer. No one would buck his authority. If he

wanted to knock heads together, nothing would stop Sampson from doing so.

I shut off the car and opened the door. Doc was already tumbling out of the back. He guided Sampson and me on how to hold Diana so she wouldn't sustain more injury. The tricky part was keeping her as still as possible as we moved up the stairs to my room. Hopefully, Nancy did as I ordered and changed the sheets.

Diana cried out, she began to fight, almost screaming when her right hand accidentally bumped into Sampson. I leaned down, afraid to aggravate her injury if someone had to grab her arms. "Diana." I spoke as softly as I could. "It's okay, I promise you that you're safe. No one else will hurt you." She immediately calmed down.

A few club bitches walked into the room. Nancy stayed in the hall, watching everything that happened. The women had a steaming bucket of water, several rags and one held Doc's bag. I waved them in. "Diana, let us help you. Doc is going to examine your injuries and the, uh, the ladies will help him clean you up."

She seemed to relax even more. I turned to leave the room so when she woke up, she'd know strange men didn't see her at her most vulnerable. I pushed a very interested Sampson out of the door. "We'll be down in the club house."

Doc nodded and opened his medical bag, pulling out a pair of scissors. I grabbed the doorknob but came rushing back in when her cry of fear rang through the room. Doc had started to cut her jeans. I could hear her begging him to stop as she flailed her arms.

"Diana." My voice was harsher than I intended. I had to swallow the fear that she would seriously hurt herself. I softened my tone. "Diana, you're safe."

"Don't, don't leave me. I trust you." Her voice sounded hoarse, deeper than I would've expected.

"I was just giving you privacy. They need to remove your clothes to clean you up. Doc is, well, a doctor, and the women

are here to help. You don't know me, so I don't want to embarrass you."

She opened her eyes, the right one was nearly swollen shut from the large pump knot above her brow. I found myself looking into the most beautiful emerald green eyes I've ever seen.

"Please. I know you s-saved me. Stay." I could tell it hurt her to talk. "Don't know anyone."

Galinda snorted a laugh. I shot a look her way. Sandy was elbowing the youngest wild one in the ribs. I stood up and stormed over, taking the bucket of hot water from her hands. I kept my voice quiet to not frighten the injured beauty on my bed, but I growled, "Get the fuck out. One more shitty thing out of you, I'll banish you from the clubhouse and personally inform every club in the area you're blacklisted."

I saw her face pale. She knew without the protection of an MC, and others knowing she'd been kicked out for an infraction, Galinda would be on the street. Soon she would be owned by a pimp. There was a risk of her being abused and forced into a drug addiction to stay under his thumb. It wouldn't be pretty. The wild one backed out then ran down the hall.

I looked at Teddie, who had been carrying Doc's bag. "You tell every club bitch they better keep their damn mouths shut. One whisper of disrespect from any of them, there will be no second chance." She nodded and passed Nancy in the doorway, who was coming into my room.

The former Soulless Bastards bitch stared at Diana lying on my bed. I could see the wheels turning. "Who is the bitch to you?" She shot an irritated glare toward Diana. "I've never even seen her before. Are you claiming her or something?" I sat down the bucket, grabbed her throat and pushed her toward the open door.

I kept a tight hold of her as I stared into her cold eyes. "None of your *fucking* business. I set the goddamn rules around here, not any club bitch, including you. Listen closely, one wrong word, one side eye, one sneer shot her way, you are

gone. Don't think I won't know or find out." I shoved Nancy out of the room and into the hallway.

Releasing my hold, I glared into her eyes. "I better not hear of you wild ones plotting either. I have no patience for your shit stirring. Got it?"

Nancy swallowed hard and nodded. With wide eyes, she raised her hand to her throat. "Yeah, yeah I got it."

Stepping back, I shut the door in her face and returned to the bed. Diana was out of it. I was worried she'd lost consciousness again. "Is she okay, Doc?"

"Yeah, I just gave her a shot of pain meds. She's stressed enough, won't do her no good to deal with us cleaning her up and fighting the pain too."

Doc grabbed the scissors and continued to cut her jeans and torn shirt from her body. I tried not to ogle her luscious curves. When I sighed, Doc just shook his head. "Take off her shoes and be careful of her ankles. She might have sprained one or both."

I did as he asked, trying not to jostle her too much. Her bright red toenail polish was chipped and growing out. Something about the sight went straight to my gut. I was brought back down when I saw her knees. They were red, bruised, and raw. Her shins were pretty banged up too. *Fuck.*

"Now that she's asleep, I'll give her wrist a more thorough exam." He lightly grasped her right forearm, his fingers probed from her elbow to her hand. Even with pain medication, Diana moaned when he got to her wrist. "Without x-rays I can't be positive she didn't break something. It's damn sure swollen. I'll put a splint on it to be safe. What shape are her ankles in?"

I glanced down, noticing I was rubbing the painful scrapes on her lower leg. I jerked my hand back like she was on fire. I hated to admit I felt like I'd touched the sun. "They don't look hurt. How bad are her knees and legs?"

"She's going to be in some pain for a while. Nothing is broken, except maybe her wrist. I'll know more in a few days

when the swelling is down. I'll get a better read then. She's got a long way to go before she feels normal." Doc grabbed a hard plastic wrist splint from his bag and a roll of cloth elastic bandage. He nodded toward her head as he placed the splint and began to wrap her arm.

"Her jaw is swollen, but nothing too serious. If he'd have hit her harder, she'd need soup and soft foods, but looks like she'll just have minor soreness. That isn't broken or dislocated that I can tell, but that asshole hit her pretty hard with something. The knot above her eye looks worse than it is." Doc stood and grabbed a rag, dipping it in the water. He began to gently clean her face.

I grabbed the softest material I could find from the pile of rags and followed suit. When I had finished cleaning what I could I went to my closet and found an old WVU t-shirt. I had no idea when I'd gotten it, but it looked well-worn and comfortable.

With Doc's help we slid the shirt over Diana's head and got her arms through the sleeves. I cut the bra between her breasts, and the straps just over the cups, then pulled it from under her body before covering her with the shirt.

"I'm going to her car and find her clothes. I'm sure she would want her own clean, you know, underwear."

Doc grinned at my sudden attack of embarrassment then turned his head away. "Yeah, most women call them panties, Viking. I'll work on her wrist while you look."

I could tell by the way he turned his head, he was using his long, braided facial hair to hide his smile. He cleared his throat. "Also, look around to see if she has any important medications like insulin or something else she needs to take regularly."

I tossed my rag into the bucket and headed out to Diana's car. No one said a word to me as I walked through the clubhouse. The women were in a corner or not in sight. Most of the guys were shooting pool or sitting at our pitiful bar set up. It wasn't Blades but it worked for our crew. One day I

planned on making a more permanent drinking/socializing area.

Diana's car was unlocked, and I could tell someone had been looking through her stuff. I nearly charged back inside. Even though I didn't take hitting women lightly, I wanted to start slapping bitches, but I needed to get back to the injured woman more.

I found an old duffle bag with clothes folded inside. They smelled clean. I also rummaged around until I found a trash bag full of wadded up things. I shrugged. They smelled clean too, but somehow, I knew she'd have better smelling dirty clothes than me or the rest of the guys.

A small bag with her personal items was lying on the back floor board. Toothbrush, deodorant, a few tampons, a bar of soap. It almost seemed more intimate to find this, than it was seeing her bare breasts. I packed up a few things that she might want when she woke up then made sure her car was locked.

As I stepped back into the club house, I called Sampson over. "Did you send anyone to Diana's car?"

The enforcer shook his head. "No. I did see Nancy coming back from outside a little bit ago. I thought she was doing something you told her to do. I assume she went back to the room she shares with the wild ones."

"Find her, hold her and have DB gather all her shit. I want everything she owns dumped on the floor and I'll go through it. I don't care if you tie her to a chair. You know what? Get all the wild ones' shit, have Heather help."

I ran my hand over my face. I didn't know if I was overly tired or angry. "If I find any of Diana's belongings with any of their shit, you and Razor escort them to the gate. They'll leave with nothing but the clothes on their backs."

Sampson nodded. "I'll let Heather know and get Nancy myself." He stalked off.

I thought he might have liked the idea of disciplining the women a little too much. Good. He wouldn't take it easy on

Nancy then. Come to think of it, I was looking forward to setting her down a peg or two, even if she was innocent in this. I just didn't want to consider why I felt that way.

## Chapter Six - Diana



MY MOUTH WAS dry. That wasn't weird. I didn't drink a lot of water before I slept in my car since I didn't have a bathroom I could safely get to.

I could tell I was on a bed, which *was* odd. I hadn't slept on one for weeks. I'd forgotten how good it felt to stretch out. Hot pain shot through me when I tried to roll over. A cry of agony was pulled from me before I could control it.

"Diana?" The voice sounded familiar. It was warm, deep and full of compassion.

Safety.

I felt safe because I knew the owner of that voice would protect me. He already had.

His name came to mind. "Viking?" I could hardly hear myself, so I had no idea if he'd heard me or not.

"Here's some water. Drink just a little for now, kitten."

I felt his hand slide under my shoulders, supporting me as a straw touched my lips. After a few sips, he guided me to lay back against the pillow. I opened my eyes, but I could only see clearly out my left one.

Reaching up, my fingertips encountered a large bump over my right eye. I hissed in pain. Warm fingers gently circled my left forearm. "Careful, you have a few places that will take time to heal."

My right hand was stiff. I lifted it to see thick brown wrap covering my mid arm to my fingers. Something hard was



between my skin and the bandage.

“Doc didn’t think it was broken but splinted it just in case. Once the swelling is down, he’ll try to examine it closer.” I slowly turned my head to get a better look at the man who had literally saved my ass.

“I can’t see you.” The room was dark, and he was sitting in front of the door where the only light was coming from. He was nothing but a shadow.

I heard his warm chuckle. “You’re not missing much. With your injuries, I wasn’t sure if you had a concussion and would need a dark room. If you feel okay, I’ll turn the lamp on. Just say the word and I’ll flip it off if it’s too much.”

“I’m fine. My head doesn’t hurt or anything. I’d like to see you to say a proper thank you.” I really wanted to know if he was as good-looking as I remembered or if I was making him out to be more fantasy than reality.

A soft light came on from the other side of the room. When Viking turned around, I caught my breath. He was a wet dream on legs. Dark blond hair and facial hair. He wasn’t overly muscular like a bodybuilder, but his arms and chest stretched his t-shirt. Thick thighs were encased in denim. His eyes were a warm chocolate brown. I recognized him from the alley where he fought my attackers. I spoke without thought. “Where’s your vest?”

Viking grinned. His teeth were nearly perfect with just the slightest gap between the top two. “I don’t wear my cut here unless I’m holding church.”

“Maybe I hit my head a little too hard. This is a church? Are you a priest or something?” A fighting priest saved me from two assholes. A fighting priest with the body of a god. Figures.

Viking sat on the left side of the bed, his full on smile was devastating. “No, I’m definitely not a holy man. And the church I mean isn’t like you’re imagining. When my motorcycle club calls a meeting, it’s referred to as church.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought I was lusting after a monk or something.” I wish I had a camera just to capture the surprise on his face. He had a lot to find out about me. “I’m usually blunt. Most say I’m stubborn as a mule, and I don’t take orders well.” It was best that he understood that from the start.

He licked his lips. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Gunnar Anderson, but everyone calls me Viking. You’re at the Merciless Few MC clubhouse. More specifically above the clubhouse in the living quarters for many of us.”

That made a lot more sense. “I should have guessed, you look like a badass. I’m Diana Taylor, but you must know that since you called me by name. I’m assuming you went through my stuff, which I would do, too.” My chin quivered. “Thank you for saving my life, Viking.”

He reached out and wiped away a tear with his thumb. “Gunnar.”

“What?” I was confused. I had heard others call him Viking. “I may have hit my head, but I know you said people call you Viking. I assumed you would want me to do the same.”

“That’s fine for the crew and bitches. I want *you* to call me by my birth name.”

He was serious. And I didn’t know why that felt important. My thoughts came to a sudden halt when I realized he called the women bitches. “Is there a reason why you call females by that offensive name?”

Viking’s smile was back. “Yeah, there’s a reason, because that’s what we call them. It’s normal in an MC.”

I would’ve frowned but my face hurt too much. “Does that mean I’m to be called ‘bitch’ as well?” I let my feelings come through in the sharp tone of my words.

“Fuck no.” Gunnar was nearly growling. “You’re Diana, and no one will refer to you as bitch and walk away with teeth in their mouth.”

I gasped when I tried to move and pain shot through my entire body again.

Gunnar leaned forward, a concerned look on his face. “You’ll need a few days to heal up, until then you need to only move when I’m here to support you.”

“I don’t have time to lay around, or wait for you to get a spare minute to follow behind me to catch me if I fall. I’m looking for my niece, Mariska. She’s only sixteen and went missing a few weeks ago.” I tried to control my panic. “My sister is beside herself in grief.”

He blew out a breath. “That answers a lot of questions. I understand how that could be scary. But you’re in no shape to sleep in a car much less pound the streets looking for her.”

I wanted to prove him wrong and I needed to use the bathroom, my bladder was getting uncomfortable. This was something I needed to do to show him I could take care of myself. I started to sit up and had to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

Gunnar shook his head. “Stubborn woman. We’ll discuss your niece but you need to recover. You can’t get up on your own. Trust me, I’ll get my crew on finding Mariska. We can go into areas and talk to people you’d never approach. Places you’d never dare go.” He stood and moved to my side of the double bed. “Doc thinks you should sit up and also move a little bit to keep from getting too stiff.”

“Thank you.” I sighed with resignation. “I need to use the bathroom.” I knew he’d insist on helping me. Frankly, I knew I needed it.

Sliding his arm under my shoulders, he helped me sit up, then guided me to the edge of the bed. It took all my strength to stand and not pass out from the pain. The thought of fainting and peeing on myself kept me from giving in. He led me to a closed door in his room that turned out to be a small bath.

Leading me inside, he stared at me as I leaned on the bathroom sink. “I’m fine. Just catching my breath. Go wait in the bedroom, and I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

Gunnar nodded and left. I could hear him speaking to someone but the words were muffled so I couldn't understand them. I finished, rinsed my left hand, and opened the door. I noticed a man with long facial hair fixed in braids standing with his hands on a wheelchair. He looked familiar, but I didn't recall his name.

"Diana, you might remember Doc, and as his name implies, he's the one who worked on you. Doc, meet Diana." The biker sort of nodded in greeting. Gunnar pushed the wheelchair toward me and helped me into it. I hated to admit that it felt good to be off my feet.

"I was telling Gunnar that I don't have time to sit around here and get babied. My niece is missing and I came to Charleston to look for her." It didn't go unnoticed that Doc's eyebrows rose when I used Viking's real name.

"Well, you're feeling as good as you are because of the pain meds. I'd say it'll be days before you feel like not downing at least Aleve. I still need to determine if your wrist is broken. With your jaw, it'll be a while before you feel like chewing steak or anything else substantial. Best if you take my advice and rest up." He glanced at Gunnar. "Besides, I'm sure Viking has a plan about your niece forming in his hard head."

"Come on, kitten. I need your help with something." He pushed the chair to the head of the stairs.

I squealed when he and Doc grabbed the wheelchair and carried it. "I could walk you know." My hands were holding the arms so hard, my knuckles were white.

"Diana, you were about to pass out walking out of my bathroom. I wouldn't bring you downstairs right now, but I need you to go through some things for me."

We entered what I would describe as a great room. There were several mismatched sofas, a large flat screen TV on the wall and a bar of sorts, built from pallets. I could see a pool table across from the entrance. In the middle of the room, there was a pile of clothes, books, and other items. I could hear a woman screaming obscenities in a different part of the building, but somewhere nearby.

Gunnar moved from behind the wheelchair to squat in front of me. He placed his hands on my knees. The warmth of his palms stole most of my attention. “When I went to get some of your personal stuff from your car, it looked like someone had already been in there. None of my guys would do that without my permission.” He stood again so I could see the stack of items.

“I’m going to show you every item here. If you see something that is yours, let me know so I can have it cleaned and put in our room.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling as if this was more than just looking for stolen things. Different clothes that I would never fit into, sequined skirts, and lace bras that would bust at the seams if I even tried to put them on were discarded when I shook my head. After the clothing items were done, he pulled a small case that held my laptop. He stopped when I gasped.

“I have one like that.” He placed it on my lap and I don’t know why my hands were shaking when I unzipped the black hardshell case. The small Chromebook came on when I pulled the case top up. The log on screen was the same as mine. I input the information I’d use to unlock it. The home screen popped up. “It’s mine. I’ve been keeping notes on where I’ve searched and descriptions of who I talked to.”

A voice sounded nearby. “She searching for someone, Viking?”

“Yeah. Her teenage niece.” Gunnar looked back at me. “So, this is yours?” When I nodded, he reached for other things in the pile. Nothing else was mine. Several other piles of items were dropped off then removed.

My body was starting to ache, my jaw was throbbing. I remembered he said I could use his real name, but I felt weird doing that around his MC. “Viking, I’m not feeling well.”

I knew then he and Doc were right. I’d never be able to search for Mariska. Tears welled up and fell down my cheeks. As hard as it was to ask, I did. “Can I go back and lay down? We can talk later about finding Mariska, okay?”

## Chapter Seven - Viking



I TRIED TO hide my emotions. It wasn't even *Nancy* that had stolen from Diana. Unless she'd taken it then given the laptop to Galinda. There was only one way to find out. First, I had to get Diana back to bed. She was sitting down but looked like she could keel over.

"DB, keep the girls where they are. I'll be in shortly." I pushed Diana to the bottom of the stairs, then scooped her up in my arms. She protested briefly, but her strength to fight soon dwindled.

By the time I tucked her in, her face was drawn in pain. Doc came in and gave her another shot. Within moments she was relaxed and sleeping.

"Stay with her while I take care of shit downstairs. Sometimes I wonder why I kept the wild ones."

"Because you have a good heart, Gunnar. But you also know when to pack that soft side away and take care of business as Viking. Go do what needs to be done, I'll stay with her until you're cleaned up." Doc turned away to close his bag. "Let me know if I'm needed."

That last thing he said, gave me the inkling he thought there'd be bloodshed. "You won't be needed, Doc. As much as they need beat for stealing, I'll just have them dropped on the other side of the gate."

I turned and headed back to the clubhouse below. I reached the last step and stood there, trying to shake off any gentleness that the woman upstairs brought out in me.

Diana revealed a side to me that I didn't want. Couldn't have. Would never allow myself to feel again. Right now, I had to stomp that compassionate shit down. The best thing for everyone was to get her fixed up, find out what happened to her niece, then send them back home to Van.

I rolled my shoulders, digging deep for the cold asshole that was born the day Hailey died. There could be no mercy. Striding forward, I could hear the girls before I entered the room. Of the three, Nancy was cussing, and one was crying, probably Galinda. Macy, the former head bitch, was probably just watching everything going on around her.

Entering the room, I growled, "Shut up."

The women immediately got quiet. "It seems like deja vu from a year ago with the strippers from Silver Angels. Shall I call the bitches at Black Dagger to get more answers from you? I know Janet is dead, but I think she trained her bitches how to effectively torture." I watched the wild ones pale.

Heather moved forward, along with several women who stayed with us from the Dagger MC. "I know exactly how to handle them. Their fucking men killed Janet. We've been biding our time, knowing the day would come when we could make them pay. This time, it won't be just baking soda that goes in your eyes." She grabbed a bag from the floor. She pulled out an unopened box of dishwashing powder.

I winced. I had many drunken conversations with Camp about that day. Nancy swallowed, her eyes never leaving Heather's hands as she used a knife to open the plastic container. Galinda began to shake.

Now was the time to ask questions. "I want the fucking truth. Who broke into Diana's car and stole her laptop?" I watched the wild ones share looks. "I'm not going to deny these girls their need for revenge for much longer. Thirty seconds, or each of you will be blinded." I sighed, almost bored. "Then I'll drop your asses on the other side of the gates."

Heather moved forward. The container lid was open, and the strong scent of the caustic detergent wafted into the room. I

watched the wild ones carefully as Heather stopped in front of Galinda who began to whimper.

Macy snarled. “Stop. It was me. I was going through her car when you were carrying the bitch up the stairs. Galinda didn’t know I put the laptop in her stuff. I didn’t think you’d discover that woman’s car had been pilfered but I knew you’d not suspect Galinda if you did. I only took the damn thing because you haven’t let us have our cells or access to a phone or computer.”

Anger rolled through me. “Your old men beat the piss out of you if you blinked wrong. I’ve heard they even made you fuck dudes from other MCs just to garner favors. We’ve treated you all well, but you were ready to kill us in our sleep. We denied your access to the outside world so you wouldn’t contact family to come here and finish us off. You know that. Every fucking privilege that you lost when we first inherited you, were being returned as you gained our trust.”

“But I don’t want to stay here!” Macy narrowed her gaze. “My old man was scum. I hated Panzer from the moment he stole me. I just want to go home, Viking. I was going to use her laptop to contact my brother, have him meet me at the edge of the property so I could escape.”

I slammed my hand on the nearest table. “Why the fuck didn’t you just tell me? I would have contacted him if you wanted out. If you had a place to go, I would’ve sent you there.”

For the first time since meeting her, I saw tears from the wild one. “Do you think Panzer ever listened or cared about what I wanted? If I would’ve asked him, he would’ve tied me up and beat me to death. Please, Viking, prove you really aren’t like them. Let me go home.”

Anger drained from me. I looked up and watched the reactions of everyone in the room. Most were stoic. Heather looked disappointed. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Macy, no one here has forced you to have sex. We’ve not beaten you or treated you badly. Why would you think we’d harm you?”



You've never given any indication that leaving is what you wanted."

"Do you know what Panzer called me? Not Macy, not old lady, but Cum Bucket. That was the name he put on my property patch and all he considered me. For the two years I was forced to live here, I was treated like a fuck toy by him and anyone he gave permission to use me. No, your MC never beat or raped me, but you also haven't looked at me as more than a problem you were forced to take on. You never asked me if I wanted to stay."

She was right. I just assumed the wild ones had nowhere to go, were under our protection, and a problem to fix. I had to focus on getting my club built up, not constantly fighting these three women. Now was the chance to move on with it.

"Fox, get the necessary info from Macy. Check it out to make sure it's legit. Then let her contact someone to come get her or make arrangements for her to get home."

The young nerdy guy stood up from the couch. He was the least MC-looking kid with his horn-rimmed glasses and wiry build. Doc had sponsored him back in Maryland. The kid had wanted to follow him to this new chapter. I'd seen firsthand that Fox could hold his own in a fight. He'd earned the respect of anyone who came across him.

He was also our tech guy, and could hack into anything on the internet. Fox was able to dig up information on anyone. That's how he got his name. He was sly as a fox. The club paid for his equipment, and I even made sure he had an office.

He nodded. "You got it, Viking."

"Sampson, escort Macy to Fox's Den. Make sure she behaves. One wrong move, carry her ass to the gates." My enforcer nodded then gently wrapped a beefy hand around Macy's upper arm, guiding her out of the room.

Once those three left, I looked at the two remaining wild ones. "Either of you want out?" I turned to look at everyone. "Do any of you want out? Speak up now, and I'll help you pack your shit."

No one said a word. I turned my attention to the remaining Soulless Bastards old ladies. “Nancy, Galinda. Now’s your chance. If you want to leave, I’ll make it happen and no hard feelings. I’ll make sure you’re sent wherever you want to go, but know this,” I moved closer to the women being held by two of my crew.

“If you decide to stay, you better chill the fuck out. No more acting out, no more causing trouble, no disrespecting our club. I don’t know what’s in your futures and I can’t guarantee you’ll be more than club bitches here, but I do know I won’t put up with your shit. If you want to be Merciless Few MC women, you better start acting like it.”

“You never offered to make us part of your MC. You treat us, hell, refer to us as wild animals.” Nancy looked down, but not before I saw the tears forming.

“You were part of a feral MC. You participated *and* tried to hide the fact a woman was kidnapped from the Daggers to torture and kill. The Soulless Bastards abducted children and women to traffick. When we took over here, the three of you acted as fucking soulless as your old men. How could we trust you? I still don’t fucking completely trust you now.”

Galinda cleared her throat. “I wanted to kill every single one of you when the Black Dagger club turned us over to you like we were their property.”

I smirked knowing that’s how all three bitches felt.

“But, honestly, I changed my mind when none of you used me as a punching bag just because you felt like it. You never shared me with everyone in the club, never whored me out for money. Macy was stolen and Panzer claimed her. She didn’t have much to do with other women, but Nancy and I were here on our own. My brother and Nancy’s boyfriend were part of the Soulless Bastards. Until you took possession of us, I thought all MCs treated women the same way.”

“Viking.” I turned to see the prospect, Johnson, step forward. He’d been one of the first prospects to be sponsored for membership here in West Virginia. Honestly, he’d probably

be voted in at the next church meeting. “I, uh, when I earn my patch, I wanted to take Galinda as my old lady.”

That was a shock. I sighed, suddenly feeling older and more tired than ever. “DB, tomorrow we’ll hold church and take a vote on allowing Nancy and Galinda to be regular girls for the MC.” Club rules kept me from nominating Johnson to be patched in. Maybe one of the others would. Right now, all I wanted was a hot shower and some sleep. “Heather, pick someone you trust, and you both will help Diana clean up tomorrow afternoon. She’ll need two women to help her undress and shower. I’m out.”

Strolling to the stairs I let the knowledge that I’d be sleeping beside a curvy goddess help soothe my ragged soul.

## Chapter Eight - Diana



MY RIGHT ARM was aching. My head too. Heavy weights across my stomach and thighs kept me from moving to get relief. At first it was hard to wake up, but the longer I laid there, the more my body hurt. I needed to switch positions. I groaned and tried to roll over when the weight suddenly disappeared.

“Diana? Are you okay?” The gravelly, sleepy male voice in my ear startled me. The bed shifted and the click of a lamp quickly followed. A soft light filled the room. Gunnar stood before me in a pair of boxer briefs. His tattoos and scars were on full display.

“Answer me, kitten. Are you okay? Do you need me to get Doc?” He leaned over, his fingers running over my forehead.

I forced my eyes from the outline of his half hard dick to his face. “Um, no, I just got stiff laying in the same position. Why were you sleeping in this bed?”

Gunnar’s eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. “Because it’s my bed. All the rooms in the clubhouse are occupied with my crew. I guess I could go to the house used by the club bitches. Would you rather I sleep with another woman?”

The thought made my chest hurt a bit. “No, it’s not that. I was just surprised.” I tried to play it cool. “And if you want to sleep with another woman, that’s none of my business.”

Gunnar pursed his lips then stood, crossing his arms over his chest. “Really?” I watched the outline of his cock grow as

he went from partial chub to completely hard. “Diana, you told me a bit about your personality before. I should do the same. I do what I want, I always tell the truth, and I never give up anything that belongs to me.” Shamelessly, he reached down and adjusted his dick through his underwear.

I fought the moan that wanted to escape. I had too much going on right now to let myself get pulled into a night of mind-numbing sex with the hottest man I’d ever seen. Besides, my body was still too injured to perform the physicality that sex with Gunnar would require. Not that he’d demand something that animalistic.

I would. I wanted to climb him like a tree and leave him breathless.

His voice shook me from my sexy thoughts. “If I wanted to sleep with someone else I would, but I wanted to sleep in my own bed.”

Gunnar moved toward the lamp, and I closed my eyes to avoid ogling his perfect ass flex though the thin cotton of his boxer briefs. He climbed into bed after turning off the lamp. “Once it’s a decent hour, I’m calling for church. After club business, I’m going to send my guys out to look for your niece. I’ll have someone come get you so you can tell my crew about her.”

I knew I was overly emotional, but I couldn’t stop the urge to cry. “Thank you, Gunnar.”

His lips brushed my temple. “Don’t thank me yet, kitten. Once we find Mariska, then I’ll expect it.”

I fought the fear his words evoked. Yes, I may want to eat him up like I was a starving lion, but I also knew he could break my heart. Oh, he’d been kind to me, even something of a hero for saving me, but men like him didn’t attach emotions to sex. I was quickly falling for the biker, and I had to guard my heart.

“I can almost hear you thinking, kitten. Let’s get some sleep, okay?”

Within moments I could hear his breathing even out. I wanted to drift off too, but my brain was in overdrive. Thoughts tumbled around in my head about Mariska. How to find her, save her, and get her back home. In between those worries, my heart was fighting my brain over my attraction to Gunnar.

Should I give in to my desire once I was healed? I wanted to feel one hundred percent to participate fully and enjoy every second.

He seemed to be interested. Would I just be a conquest that he'd move on from the moment our clothes were back on? Maybe.

Who was I kidding? Of course, he would.

Then again, sex with him would be a once in a lifetime experience. I may spend the rest of my life regretting it if I didn't at least create memories to replay for years.

Okay, mind made up, I knew if the situation allowed, I wouldn't fight it. I'd go all in.

Once my mind was made up, sleep came quickly. I was startled when a feminine voice spoke my name. I opened my eyes to see a smiling woman standing next to my bed.

"Hey, sorry to wake you, but Viking thought you might want a shower and asked me to help you." She reached out a hand. "My name is Heather. This is Anita. We both joined the Merciless Few from another club a year ago."

The women were younger than me by at least a decade. I was in my late thirties and overweight. These women were maybe in their early twenties and thin with huge boobs. I felt like a used dishrag next to them. "I, I think I can manage on my own. Just help me gather my stuff then point me in the general direction."

Heather smiled as she helped me sit up on the edge of the bed. Even though I was feeling better, not as sore, it pissed me off that I still needed help to do simple things. Like sitting up from a prone position. I hissed in pain as I propped my right arm on the mattress.

“I know it’s hard sometimes to accept help. From what Viking says, you have a hard time doing that anyway. And right now you feel extra vulnerable, I mean, I would. You’re hurt and in a strange place, but Anita and I were strippers and trust me, you ain’t got nothing we haven’t seen.”

Anita chuckled. “And seen a lot. Between stripping beside other girls, and getting ready together, I’ve seen more tits than most of the bikers downstairs.”

Both women laughed as they got on either side of me. I had to admit, I liked and felt comfortable with them. Anita had a nice bag in her left hand.

“Besides, if you wanted to work at Silver Angels you’d make a killing in tips.” Heather had propped my right arm over her shoulders, careful of the splint.

They were slowly walking me to the bathroom attached to Gunnar’s room. My bladder reminded me that I needed a moment alone. “I know you guys are trying to be nice, but let’s not get carried away. Men might pay me in a strip club, but it’d be to put my clothes back on.”

Anita was under my left arm. “Are you kidding?” When I scoffed, she continued. “Come on, haven’t you ever heard of the plus size model Ashley Graham? Girl, you put her to shame. Don’t tell me you don’t know how pretty you are.”

I was shocked and thought they were trying to boost my self-worth. “I always considered myself okay in the looks department, but being a size sixteen now, let’s just say I dated way more frogs than princes and I was younger with less wrinkles and more hutzpah.”

“That’s crazy.” Heather led me to the small sink and waited to make sure I was steady on my feet. “I’m sure you need to pee or something, but Anita and I will be right outside the door when you’re done. We’ll help you get undressed and take off that splint so you can shower. Anita brought her shampoo and stuff. I’ll go through your bags if you’re okay with it and bring you something comfortable to wear.”

I realized they weren't going to let me take my shower by myself. I nodded so I could use the bathroom in peace. I realized after it was too late that I needed to take off my splint to wash my hands. "Damn." Being right-handed, I didn't have enough coordination to remove the bandage to pull off the splint.

"Hey, everything alright in there?" Heather was speaking through the door.

I sighed but told her my issue. Without a word she and Anita came in, removed the splint, and helped me undress. They talked and joked the entire time, helping me feel more comfortable. Heather shampooed my hair and Anita lathered the washcloth for me to use.

By the time I was dried and dressed, my body was clean, but pain was setting in my wrist. Anita ran downstairs. Within moments, Doc came in and examined it. After declaring it was a bad sprain, and rewrapping it, he left to finish church with the rest of the men.

Heather and Anita stayed to chat. They explained to me the role women played in the club and how the term "bitch" was just another word. No one took offense because the guys treated them well, so the term was looked at as affectionate. I didn't think I'd get used to it right away. Then again, it wasn't like I was sticking around after Mariska was found. It didn't matter how I felt about anything to do with this MC.

By the time Gunnar came to get me, I felt like I'd made two very good friends.



## Chapter Nine - Viking



I STOPPED BEFORE knocking on the door of my room. I could hear Diana laughing and my heart did a somersault in my chest. I needed to rein in my emotions. I'd seen her cry, heard her groan in pain, even relished at the desire for me I'd seen in her eyes.

But her happiness went straight to my gut. I wanted to be the reason for that joy. I wanted to be the one to bring the sparkle in her eyes, that was probably there right now.

My first instinct was to go to her, pull her into my arms and swallow that laughter as I kissed her. I was drawn to Diana in a way I had never experienced. The question was why?

When I first saw her, she was vulnerable, but so fucking strong. Doc told me some of her injuries were defensive. She was fighting back against her attackers, and I liked that. To me, she was beautiful, even swollen and covered in bruises. After I rescued her, she trusted me, and that made me feel like a goddamn hero.

But what did I really know about her?

Diana had only been in my care for a few days. I knew she lived in the tiny, rural town of Van. She has a sister, who's daughter is currently missing.

The woman was brave as fuck to live in her car while searching for her niece. The woman had the heart of a lioness to fight off her attackers. A curvy dynamo that didn't have a filter, which I thought was the sexiest thing about her.

Until I heard her laugh.

All of that combined made me want to run back to Ocean City with my tail between my legs. I couldn't let myself fall for anyone ever again. Caring for someone, then losing them isn't worth the resulting pain. Hell, I'd never seen a happy relationship, much less have one. I had to find a way to guard my heart, because I wasn't going to tumble into loving anyone ever again.

Opening the door, Diana's laughter died as she turned frightened eyes my way. I realized my mistake. She was still suffering trauma from her assault. My sudden entry triggered her fear. Dammit. It occurred to me that I wanted to protect her.

I had to give myself a mental slap. "Sorry, kitten. We're ready for you downstairs. Do you have a picture of Mariska on your phone or a way to text it to me? I can make sure the crew has it when they're looking for her."

She nodded. "I do have a recent one on my phone. I printed several that I showed others while I was searching for her."

Heather elbowed Anita and both women quietly gathered their things. As they slipped out the door, Heather stopped and put a hand on my chest. She whispered, "Be careful with her, Viking."

What the fuck did that mean?

I turned my attention back to Diana. She was standing tall and proud, but her eyes showed how insecure she really felt. I stopped myself from going to her and wrapping her in my arms. I cleared my throat instead.

"Are you ready to go downstairs with me?" I wanted to ask if she was okay. I wanted to know if there was anything I could do to make this easier for her. But I wouldn't give her that consideration in case she could see my unwanted feelings, just as I saw hers.

"I'm ready. Just let me grab my stuff." She winced as she bent over to grab something from the floor. Without thinking I moved forward and scooped up the backpack and laid it on the

bed. Diana gave me a small smile before using her left hand to rummage through the contents. Once she had a manila envelope and her cell, I led her from the room.

We took a while to make it down the stairs. I guess since I was gone so long, the boys got bored. They were pretty rowdy when we walked into the makeshift conference room. Fox was ignoring everyone as he sat in the corner working on his multiple laptops. As soon as Double Barrel saw us, he gave a loud whistle, quieting the room immediately.

Tiny jumped up from his chair and gave it to Diana. “Thank you,” she looked at the name patch and grinned. Of course, Tiny was six and a half feet tall with shiny dark hair and huge muscles. “I appreciate it, Tiny.”

The big man gave a rare smile. He took her uninjured hand and brought it to his lips. I shoved him in the chest to put space between him and Diana. “Tiny, find your seat.”

After a wink he moved across the room and sat in an empty chair. Asshole.

“Okay, settle down. We have business to discuss. Everyone knows about Diana, but you don’t know what’s going on with her. She needs our help and I intend to do just that.” I turned to my tech specialist. “Fox, I’m going to have Diana send you a recent picture of her niece, Mariska. She’s sixteen and went missing from the Town Center.”

The room got serious real quick. We all knew what that meant, and it wasn’t good.

I spouted out Fox’s cell number for Diana. Within moments I heard his phone ping. “Got it.” His fingers flew over the keyboard of one laptop. Then sat it aside and turned to the second, smaller one. “But I have news.”

A few seconds later he used the remote and turned on the large screen television. A surprisingly clear video of an alley came into view. Two men could be seen peeking around the corner. I heard Diana take a deep inhale. She recognized her attackers.

“This was posted to an underground website where people pay to view ferocious street crimes. It’s a fairly new thing. It’s unclear who gets the money. From what I discovered in the last few hours, there are so many bounces on the IP addresses, it’d be hard to find the original poster or get his bank info.” Fox was bending over his computer, pushing buttons. “But I’m not giving up.”

Watching the men grab Diana and drag her deeper into that back street had my blood boiling. Her scream reverberated through the room. I grabbed the remote and turned the sound down. It was hard enough to watch, but hearing her struggle made me feel excessively violent.

Everyone, including Diana, was watching the screen intently, but I would glance her way often. I tried to gauge her reactions and wondered if she was upset. When she saw herself rake the keys over one of the men’s faces, she smiled. There were a few ‘fuck, yeah’s’ from my crew.

The volume was low, but the thuds of her being hit were still loud enough that I felt the impact when the blows landed on her body. My fists were clenched as tight as my jaw. I wanted to brutally murder those fuckers.

Once the fight between Diana and the two men turned in her attackers’ favor, the shift in attitude of my brothers was palpable. My heart was pounding in fear and admiration of the injured woman. I wanted to comfort her but fought the urge. She wasn’t mine.

We all knew how this ended, but when she started to crawl over the filthy concrete, I still found myself praying she’d escape. I hadn’t begged for God’s help in almost two decades. And it had the same result both times. Hailey had died. And Diana never got away.

Diana’s eyes followed the action as my crew, and I came into view. My hands were beginning to cramp from tightly holding my fists. After watching her entire ordeal, God, I wanted to beat those fuckers all over again. If I had known everything, they’d done to her, I’d have brought those pieces of shit back to the compound and killed them both. Slowly.

Once the video ended, the room was dead silent, but for Fox tapping on the keyboard. All eyes turned to Diana. The faces of my brothers ranged from admiration to sympathy. I could tell they wanted to go after those fuckers too. I'd have loved nothing more than to give them free rein, but right now we needed to find Mariska.

Diana cleared her throat. "I mean, I was there, but it was different watching it all happen. It almost seems like it happened to someone else. I thought, it seems like I remember fighting harder. Time seemed different too. On one hand it seemed to take much longer, but at the time, it moved slowly."

"You did good, girl." Doc, who moved to sit beside her during the video, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "If it had been the one asshole, you would have gotten away. I'm proud of you."

Fox spoke up. "I ran a check on the CPD's private server. Someone called nine one one when they heard Diana scream. The cops found some video evidence from a security camera across the street. It was just a shot of the men's faces and them grabbing Diana, but that's all. They're looking for the two men, but investigators believe they're from out of the state. Emailed conversations between the chief of police and the mayor make it clear they think those men are part of a ring that travels the country looking for victims to attack people and video the confrontation. I tend to agree."

He pushed a button and the screen split into nine boxes. Each time, the same two men were in a brawl with someone. Most were women, some were smaller or younger men who it didn't seem at first glance would give them much trouble.

"There are about fifteen to twenty videos by these guys alone, each in different locations. The dumbasses forgot to turn off their geolocations on their uploads, so I can pinpoint where they shot the videos. I'm running a program I created to search the web for their identities, and once I get an ID, I'll cross reference for plane tickets, bus tickets, any public mode of transportation and their location." Fox's voice was distracted as he talked. "What do you want me to do if I find out who they are?"

Taking a deep breath, I fought my first gut reaction. I wanted to hunt them down and pick them apart then burn the bones. My first priority was finding Mariska. As much as I hated to, I said, “Anonymously send all the information you find to Mark Steele at the CPD. He’ll pass it on to the state and feds.”

The room deflated. I knew they wanted to go after those bastards. I said as much. “There was a reason I brought Diana here. We need to put all of our efforts into finding Diana’s sixteen-year-old niece. Once we find Mariska, if those fuckers aren’t in police custody, they might never be found.” I let the implication that we’d be the ones to make them disappear sink in.

Fox used his phone to send the girl’s picture to everyone. It was silent while they looked at it and read the circumstances of her abduction.

Razor stood up. “Why don’t we send this info to the Devil’s Daughters too? Their prez, Sammi Jo, could help look around. She can get women to trust her that we can’t as men. We all know that Sammi can take care of herself. She can fight better than any of her six Garvey brothers.”

“Good thinking.” Nodding, I gave Fox the order to do as Razor suggested.

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary now.” Fox’s voice was tinged with dread.

I could see Diana pale in response. “Why?”

My tech guy looked up, gulping. “I thought I’d search the dark web using my facial rec program. I did it on a fluke, but I found something, and it’s not good.” He transmitted from his computer to the television screen once more.

“Explain to me what the fuck I’m looking at.” The page looked like an online retailer. Only there were pictures of people. From the top of the screen there was a search bar next to a strip of script for age, race, kinks, even gender.

“This is a sight to buy,” Fox took a breath, “people. I think I found Diana’s niece.”

He clicked on a thumbnail picture, filling the screen with the face of a young woman.

“Oh my God.” Diana’s voice was shaking. “That’s her. That’s Mariska.”

## Chapter Ten - Diana



MARISKA'S FACE ON a site to sell humans, nearly stole my breath. My stomach cramped and sweat broke out on my palms. She looked so scared. Did she know we were looking for her? God, I hope she knew.

She was listed as a minor between twelve and seventeen. There were also hashtags, like a damn social media post. One was young, another virgin, and the last, had never been kissed. I swallowed several times to keep from throwing up.

"Goddamn it." Viking began to pace. "Razor, go ahead and send the info to Sammi Jo, see what she can do. Fox, see if you can broker a sale. We'll arrange to buy her, and if possible, trace where they're keeping other girls. This is fucked up. I thought we stopped the trafficking ring."

Tiny stood up. "We might have stopped the one run by Mingo. It's hard to say if this is the same group and they've gone underground, or if it's a different organization. Whatever the fuck it is, I don't like it."

"Hey," Doc got my attention by squeezing my shoulder. "You're trembling. I know this is difficult. I can take you back upstairs and give you something for your nerves. God knows I'd need it."

Part of me wanted to go, part of me wanted to stay. Mariska was mine. My blood. "I can't be a coward and hide in safety. She's out there right now, scared and alone, facing God knows what."



Knowing what I had just voiced out loud was the stark truth, broke something inside me.

The utter desperation, the grief I felt, knowing this girl that I had raised and loved as my own, was suffering. It was worse than any other physical pain I had endured. I felt the room spinning as my soul was crushed. There are no words to describe the sound that came out of me.

I couldn't hear what was going on in the room, just my heartbeat as it thudded in my ears. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. The harder I tried, the less I could take in. My hands and feet were numb, and my body felt as if it was going to float away.

Warm hands cupped my face. "Diana, kitten, relax. Listen to my voice, listen to me. Breathe with me. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. That's a good girl. Again. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. Keep it up."

Viking's face slowly came into focus. I felt his thumbs brushing across my wet cheeks. My body was shaking and it took me a few seconds to realize my hands were on his chest. "I'm s-sorry." I started to cry. My heart felt like it was breaking.

"It's okay. Come here." He drew me into his embrace. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulled me tightly against him. I'd never felt so cherished. He was warm and strong, hard muscle, and quiet strength. I needed both.

"I can't imagine how traumatizing all this is." His breath puffed against my ear as he spoke. "I promise that my crew and I will do everything we can to rescue Mariska." He rubbed my back in slow, soothing circles.

"Thank you," I hiccupped. "Gunnar." I started to gain control of my emotions. I hated to, but I pulled back slightly. Our eyes met. Time seemed to slow as we stared into one another's soul. A connection I'd never experienced before, sizzled through me like lightning. Every hair on my body stood in awareness.

His gaze dropped to my mouth. I never wanted to kiss someone so badly in my life. I licked my dry lips then swallowed. His chocolate brown eyes bored into mine.

He raised his right hand, his fingertips blazed a trail from my temple, down my cheekbone to the corner of my mouth. Gunnar whispered something then kissed the opposite corner of my lips. His right hand slid to cup my jaw. His warm fingers lightly pressed against my skin.

Our lips brushed gently, nothing more than a feather light touch. He groaned, tightening his hold around my waist. I felt his dick harden against my thigh and leaned into him, craving his length, giving him permission to take this further. I felt alone in the world and needed the comfort his body offered.

“Boss.” The hesitant voice of Fox was like being dunked in cold water. “I don’t want to interrupt, but I have an update.”

My hand flew to cover my mouth. I was instantly ashamed. Not for the kiss itself, but how at this moment, I was ready to drop to my knees and beg him to make love to me. Help me feel anything but helpless. The entire club had witnessed it. I wanted to put space between us. Using my left hand, I pushed against his chest to force him to let me go.

Gunnar’s arms circled around me, holding me to him and not letting me move. When I looked around, the room was empty but for us and Fox. When I looked back at him, he cleared his throat and spoke. “What’s up?”

“I went through the steps of, um, buying Diana’s niece and it seemed to go through. Then it was canceled without reason. That makes me nervous for a few reasons. They either figured out that I wasn’t a real customer, or, most likely, someone outbid me.”

“How much did you offer?” This time Gunnar dropped his hands from my body and moved quickly toward Fox. I followed.

“Fifty kay. I would have offered more, but we have to send payment within one hour of winning and that is the max I can send. The only way to get more, would be to get Zero’s

permission and then have the funds transferred to an account I can access quickly.” Fox’s voice was nearly shaking in distress.

“Once you send the money, is there any way you could get it back once we have Mariska?” I sounded a lot calmer than I felt. “I don’t have much because I spent it all looking for her. I can try to gather more money, but it’ll take time.”

I knew Bella didn’t have extra money since she had student loans. Besides, my being in Charleston was running her funds thin. Without my job adding to the bank, she would be struggling to pay all the bills on her own. My next thought was my parents. God, I didn’t want to go that route, but I’d do anything for my niece.

Gunnar was pulling out his cell phone. “Don’t worry about it. Zero is the president of the entire MC and he’ll help all he can, I’m sure of it.”

I could hear a man’s voice answer through his cell phone. “Viking, brother. How’s it fucking going in West Virginia?”

“Hey man, things are getting settled. Look, I have a problem and I need your help.” Gunnar laid his phone on the table. “I got you on speaker so Fox can get in on this.”

“Let’s have it.” I could hear the man, Zero, drinking something. I could use a drink myself.

“We found out we’re still dealing with a human trafficking ring, but this time it’s on the dark web. We need to get one of the girls, maybe even find out where they’re running their business. We offered fifty for her but got outbid. We need your help to offer more.”

The man on the other end of the call hummed. “So, what do you think you need?”

Fox spoke up. “After we got outbid, I did research on other girls who have similar selling points. Most go for around two hundred.”

“Money isn’t the issue.” Zero’s voice was muffled as he moved his phone. “We need to get this shit stomped out. How much time do I have to get the funds?”

Fox cleared his throat. "I'm going to say no more than fifteen minutes, thirty max. The sooner we offer, the better chance we have."

Zero said curse words I'd never heard before. "Mammoth!" There was a pause. "How much cash can we move in ten minutes?"

There was another male voice in the background. Zero must not have had his phone on speaker or had his hand over the mic. I could hear a conversation, but not their words. All this talk had my stomach on fire.

"All I can get my hands on that quickly is five hundred."

Fox nodded, even though Zero couldn't see. "I can work with that. I'm setting up a program I've been working on. It's similar to the one I used to track the Soulless Bastards bank accounts, but this one will work in real time. I'm going to track the account or accounts after we transfer the payment and find their income then funnel out the money."

"Fine. We'll take our five hundred back and take thirty percent of the total. Sound fair?"

My heart couldn't take any more delays. I wanted to scream that they just make the deal already. Gunnar looked at me and nodded. He could see my distress. "Done. I'll keep you in the loop. Thanks, man."

The call ended. "Okay Fox, go ahead and make the deal however you think best, all at once or in smaller bids."

"I think it'd be best to go for smaller amounts. It might delay the process and give me time to find the center of operation." Fox was already typing. He suddenly blew out a breath. "The only issue I have is I don't know how much we were outbid. I'm going to go one fifty and hope it's enough. Hopefully, this will take several more hours until we get word. The longer it takes the better, really."

Gunnar turned to face the empty room. He raised his voice. "DB!"

When the big man came into view, Gunnar said, "Gather the crew and hit the armory. Take stock. I want everyone ready

to ride when I give the word. That means no drinking until this shit goes down. Tell Doc to get his bag ready and have the cage gassed up for transport. I want cells charged as well.”

“Got it. Do you want me to contact any other MC?” Double Barrel pulled out his cell phone.

“Let’s wait to see where we might be headed first. If we cross territories, we’ll let them know. Otherwise, keep this on the DL. I don’t want to lose the element of surprise and we don’t know who these fuckers are allied with.” Gunnar grabbed my hand. “Fox, let me know of any changes. I’m taking Diana upstairs.”

“Yeah, sure thing, Viking.”

## Chapter Eleven - Viking



I KNEW WHEN I saw Diana's face, I couldn't ignore her needs. Her panic attack sealed it. I couldn't offer my heart, but I could give her use of my body. That would have to be enough.

"Come on, kitten." After taking her hand, I led her to my room. We might have to leave soon, but I knew I had at least an hour. One thing I do remember from my experience with losing Hailey; I wanted someone to give me something else to focus on. I needed to forget the horror, if only for a bit.

I didn't have that luxury, but I could do that for Diana.

We entered my room, and Diana had yet to say a word. Once I closed and locked my bedroom door, I pulled her into my arms. She melted into me. "I know it must be unbearable for you."

I felt her shiver. "I don't understand how this could be happening right now. I feel so helpless and afraid. I feel so much, I can't come to terms with it all. I don't know what to do."

"I do." I leaned back to look into her eyes. "Get undressed."

"What?" Very few times in my life have I seen such a shocked look on someone's face.

"You heard me. You need someone to take over your tumbling thoughts, to help you forget the way you're feeling right now. There's nothing wrong with that." I reached out

tugging on the hem of her shirt. She didn't move at first, then I saw the moment she gave in to her needs.

Diana slowly raised her arms, letting me pull the shirt over her head. I took my time undressing her, taking care of her injuries. Once she was bare, my heart was in my throat. "God, you're just so beautiful."

Her face turned pink and she seemed to waver in her decision. Pulling her to me, I kissed her like I had fantasized about. Nothing prepared me for her surrender, or how sweet she'd taste, the warmth of her body against mine, or how her moan would sink into my soul. I had to fight the urge to claim her.

That thought alone kept me from stripping out of my own clothes. I wanted this to be about her, and to guard my heart. When she pulled at my shirt, I let her take it off. The opportunity to feel her skin against mine was too much of a temptation to resist.

Her small hands went to my belt, but I pulled them away and brought them to my lips. "Get on the bed, kitten." When she bit her lip and moved back toward the mattress with the look of pure seduction, I nearly came in my pants.

Diana situated herself to lay on her back, letting her legs fall open. Her shiny pink pussy was like a beacon. I needed to taste her. I moved to the bottom of the bed, staring at the gorgeous sight. I slowly crawled between her legs, my eyes never leaving her folds.

She cried out when my mouth made contact with her body. I used my thumbs to part her slightly then began to lick and suck each side of her pussy, taking my time to nibble at each lip. Her left hand slid into my hair while her hips jerked against my mouth.

When I sucked Diana's clit into my mouth, I placed one hand on her belly to hold her down while I flicked her nub hard and fast with my tongue. I wanted to bring her to a quick and dirty orgasm. I needed to feel her come against my face.

Her feet found their way to my back as she arched and writhed. I felt her toes curl and her fingers tighten in my hair then heard her moan as she hit her first climax. Her crying out my name was a bonus that I didn't know I needed until it was uttered.

I backed away from her oversensitive body, looking at her face. Flushed pink and shiny with perspiration, she was so beautiful that way. I knew I needed to start all over again.

"Once more, kitten." I slid my middle finger into her wet tunnel, then quickly added another. Her sigh encouraged me to move inside her. I curled my fingers slightly as I fucked her.

Her breath came in fast and choppy. "Gunnar, oh, God."

I clenched my teeth against the urge to slide my cock into her wet heat. I also knew once I did, I'd be as hooked on Diana as many were to heroin. I couldn't take that chance, no matter how much I craved it.

To push her over the edge, I moved so that I could take one of her nipples into my mouth. I licked and sucked it, then moved to the other, lightly biting the areola.

The walls of her pussy began to squeeze my fingers and I knew it would feel so damn good on my aching cock. God, I never wanted a woman this intensely. Her body was tense as she rode the thin line to her orgasm. I prayed for her to come. I couldn't hold out freeing my erection and fucking her for much longer.

"Fuck."

When she plunged over the edge, I felt myself falling down a spiral with her. And for her. Damn, I was in trouble.

I moved to lay by her side, not holding her wasn't an option, even with my heart on the line. I kissed her temple.

"Gunnar, you didn't get off. I can't leave you like that." I stopped her hand from touching my dick.

"I'm okay. None of this was for me, kitten. I'll take my frustrations out on the assholes I get to hunt down. I wanted to do this for you. Now, close your eyes and try to rest."



Reaching down I grabbed a blanket and covered her delectable body.

“What if something happens with Mariska?” She tried to hide her yawn.

“Then I’ll wake you. I’d never keep something from you where she’s concerned.”

“Will you stay with me for a bit?” Diana closed her eyes and snuggled into me.

God, I wanted this woman. But I could never drag her into my world. Not the dangerous MC world, or my fucked-up heart and brain. “Sure.”

Within minutes her body relaxed against me. I knew she was asleep, but my heart was going a hundred miles an hour. If I stayed with her any longer, I’d be like a puppy nipping at her heels begging for her affection.

I slid from beneath her and grabbed for my t-shirt, dragging it over my head. My raging hard on died when I realized I felt more than lust for the woman sleeping in my bed. I was going downstairs to kick Fox’s ass into gear.

Finding Mariska meant Diana could get out of my life and back into hers. The sooner she was gone, the sooner I could forget her and move on. I was just fine fucking random bitches. I was perfectly happy and didn’t need Diana in my life, taming me or worse. At least that’s what I tried to convince myself.

Just as I unlocked the door, I felt the knob jiggle. Unwanted anger raged through me. What if someone had just traipsed in my room like they fucking owned it five minutes ago? They’d not only have seen me holding Diana in my arms, but every inch of her curvy body.

Flinging the door open I burst into the hallway, bumping chests with Brass. “Why the fuck does everyone think they can just bust through my door like I don’t deserve one moment of privacy?”

My road captain’s eyes grew large in surprise then narrowed with the barely controlled temper he was famous for.

He earned the nickname because he carried a set of brass balls. Most of our MC avoided angering the man. Apparently, I was stupid enough to pick a fight with a man with anger issues and a questionable sense of what a 'fair fight' meant.

"Maybe," he grumbled, "it's because when you moved in here, you told us all we could walk into your room whenever you were needed. I didn't realize that had changed. All you needed to do was tell us to stop." His bright blue eyes were focused on me, assessing the danger.

I could feel my lip curling as my hands fisted by my sides. DB chose that moment to top the stairs. "If you guys want to go at it, take it outside and I'll call for the club to take bets on the winner. The thing is, neither one of you will be one hundred to crash the warehouse Fox just found with the stolen girls inside."

I whipped my head to face my Veep. "Is he certain?"

"Well, that's something you'd have to ask him. I only know he sent me up here to tell you." Without saying another word, he shrugged and returned to the first floor.

I ran my hand through my hair trying to control my rolling emotions. "We'll spar later if we still need to. Come on."

Brass nodded once then followed me to Fox's office.

My hacker was surrounded by computers and laptops, and a few burner phones. He was frantically typing on one keyboard, then turning in his chair to check a different monitor. He grabbed a laptop and started pounding the keys. I'd be overwhelmed by all the electronics, but Fox was in his geeky element.

I didn't bother to mince words. "How sure are you that you found the black market girls?"

"I was hoping the geotagging was turned on, but I couldn't get that lucky. What I did was see a few things through windows in some of the pictures. Small tidbits here and there, but enough to make a puzzle where I could put the pieces together." He turned around pulling a small Chromebook onto his lap.

A huge monitor behind him lit up. Pictures of the captured kids began to fill the screen. In each photo, a small window was barely noticeable behind the person, but through each pane of glass, a different background could be seen.

“I wouldn’t have even seen those windows, Fox.” I squinted to try and make sense of how it could be of use.

“Exactly. Most people on the site are there to look over the goods, so to speak. But, I had a different goal in mind.” Fox pushed buttons on his beloved electronics and the pictures on the monitor changed, zooming behind the kids. Each window slid around until a skyline was evident.

“I took the buildings and triangulated possible matches starting in Charleston and moving outward. I figured if Mariska was taken from the Town Center, they had to have a place close by. I got lucky.” Another photo popped up showing several buildings. “The angle of these buildings means the pictures were taken here.”

“An abandoned warehouse in South Charleston.” I took in a breath. “What are the odds that they were photographed there and then moved somewhere else?” I didn’t want to get my hopes up. Or Diana’s either.

“Honestly? I can’t guarantee that’s not the case. But if I were running this operation I’d want to make sure I didn’t draw attention to my business by moving around with captives. Once a person is bought, I could understand arranging a swap at a different location for that one person.”

“But you’d keep all your merchandise in one place.” DB crossed his arms. “That would be easier to feed them, and keep tabs on them as well. I’d say Fox is right.”

“Okay, so where are we on the bidding of Mariska?” I leaned my ass on Fox’s desk. He gave me a side eye but didn’t say anything.

“It’s been about twenty minutes since I bid two hundred. Not to jinx it, but I feel it’ll be a go. My other offers were canceled by this point in the process.”

His computer dinged. I wanted to jump down his throat while he read the message. “It’s done. Once I send the money, I’ll get an encrypted email with directions.” He typed briefly then stopped and read.

Taking a deep breath, Fox sat back in his chair. “I’m going to text you the location of the exchange location, and even though we know where the warehouse is, that address too. We’ll all be on the same page.”

Suddenly his eyes went wide. “Holy shit!” Fox sat up and began to furiously type. “The program to trace where the funds went just sent back the results.” His office was stone quiet while he did his computer thing.

“There are three accounts the money was split between. But the interesting thing is it wasn’t divided equally. One account got fifty percent, the other half was a thirty, twenty split.”

I moved to look over his shoulder. “Can you tell how much is in each account?” When Fox scrolled down, I almost swallowed my tongue. “A total of three million from all the accounts together. Can we grab that?” I was nearly salivating at filling the MCs coffers with that money.

Fox’s delay in answering me had my mood crashing.

“Well, of course I can, but here’s the thing. I should do it soon to keep them from realizing they’ve been hacked. Once I do though, they’ll break ranks and run and maybe kill the kids they have in that warehouse. We have to time this out perfectly.”

I stood and paced. “Okay, if it comes down to it, I’d love the money, but I want to get the girl and as many of those kids as we can. The millions would be icing on the cake. How long do you think you have before they discover you’ve found their accounts?”

“If I was working for them, I’d have tripwires that would notify me the second someone outside my network accessed it. That obviously isn’t the case here, but I’d not play with more than a few hours at best.” Fox was chewing on an ink pen.

“Okay, Doc, I want you to wear your Sunday best and head over to the rendezvous for Mariska and take Tiny as backup. Once you have her, drive hell bent for leather back to the compound.”

I looked at the rest of my crew. “We’ll head to the warehouse and leave the prospects to guard the compound. DB, contact the Daggers, see if any of them volunteer to ride with us and bring their doctor. I don’t know the shape those victims will be in and Doc is going to be with Mariska. We don’t have much time, so let’s get this wrapped up.” I walked toward the stairs. I needed to wake Diana.

Knowing Diana would fight me about staying at the compound, I still wasn’t prepared for how I would react to her anger. Truthfully, I would feel the same way as her. But my need to keep her safe wouldn’t allow me to put her in more danger. Diana had suffered enough injury already. I hoped our moment of passion before she fell asleep would sway her in my direction. I was wrong.

“I am *not* going to stay here! I’ve raised Mariska since she was a baby. She might as well be my own daughter. You can’t leave me behind, Gunnar. She’ll need me!” She put her hands on her hips and God help me, if Diana would’ve stomped her foot I wouldn’t have been surprised. I was also smart enough to know that she’d not appreciate me telling her how adorable she looked.

“Diana, listen to me. Even if you weren’t injured, I wouldn’t let you anywhere near the action. Look,” since she appeared angry enough to attack me, I tried to reason with her. “Mariska is going to need you. Wouldn’t you rather be here when she arrives so you can be in a better frame of mind. If you go with us, you’ll be stressed, tense, maybe even traumatized by the violence you’re bound to see. Staying here, you’ll be stressed, but once you see her, you’ll have something positive to focus on.”

My desire for a normal Diana was hot, but damn when her eyes sparked in anger, I was a goner.

“Stop doing that.” Her face was flushed, reminding me what she looked like when she came.

“Stop what, kitten?” I was fighting an erection. Her feisty side was something to behold. Now I understood why Camp would get horny when his old lady was pissed.

“Looking at me like I’m an innocent little girl you need to protect. I’m thirty-eight years old. Being a grown independent woman, I can make decisions about my own life.” Her eyes had narrowed, and she leaned forward as if she planned on marching up to me to challenge me to a fight. “And I mean to go with your club to get Mariska.”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “Trust me, I am not seeing you as an innocent little girl. But, no. End of discussion, Diana. I only told you about it so you’d be kept in the loop. Don’t make me regret it. You trust me or you don’t, either way you’re staying here. I’ll get Cowboy to tie you to my bed if I have to.” The idea of her strapped down, naked and under my control had merit.

Diana growled and rushed forward until her fists landed on my chest. “She’s my responsibility. Mariska is nothing to you.”

“Because she’s your responsibility, she’s now mine as well.” I didn’t want to take time to examine my comment. “I saved you and I can save her. You have to let me go do that. I’m running out of time. Do I need to get Cowboy to guard you?”

It hurt to see the look of betrayal and resignation on her face. Stepping back she simply shook her head then moved to sit on the bed. I turned to leave the room when her voice stopped me. “Gunnar. Be careful.”

I left the room, determined to not only have Mariska brought to my compound safe, but rescue as many victims from that warehouse as I could. Stopping by the armory, I grabbed an extra knife and strapped it to my inner left calf.

My trusty Glock was loaded and already strapped to my side. A smaller Ruger was placed in a holster at my lower

back. I had extra clips and ammo at the ready. Hopefully we would get in and out without too much bloodshed.

The Black Dagger MC were sending volunteers and their medic, Grim, to help. Once they rode up, we'd head out. Doc had left with Tiny to pick up Mariska at the arranged meeting place. He had orders to call Franks, a prospect left behind to guard the compound, and coordinate with Fox.

We had less than two hours to rescue a sixteen-year-old sex slave, but who knew how many others at a different location. After that, Fox's program would wipe out the three accounts and hide the millions of dollars in untraceable secret accounts of our own.

Zero would shit a bird when he found out he'd be getting a cool nine hundred thousand once things settled. Hell, just out of gratitude for the club, I might decide to bump it up to a million. First, we had a job to do, and victims to save.

## Chapter Twelve - Doc



I'VE SEEN A lot in my fifty years on this Earth. Serving in the Middle East and going through several tours of combat, my body was used to the stress of the unknown. Would there be an attack? How many enemy combatants would I face? Would I die? Would I have to kill? All questions that I asked myself. I learned to live with the moments of uncertainty between the questions and the answers.

I sat in the passenger seat as Tiny drove us to the abandoned building in Kanawha City. I was worried. It was close to a major road. Anyone could see us going in and out of the parking lot. It was also to our advantage. A hail of bullets would probably be out of the question.

I knew why Viking had sent Tiny. At six foot eight, and a tolerance to pain that was baffling, he was also a skilled fighter. I once removed a bullet from his leg without numbing or pain meds. He never even blinked. I'd also seen him cry watching movies where the dog got killed. John Wick would have nothing on Randall "Tiny" Emmet.

"We're here." The turn signal seemed to ring through the silence of the car. "I'll be moving toward the back of the building to hopefully stop any escape by the motherfucker. You know the signal to use if you get in trouble?"

"Yes, and I know that Fox told the kidnappers that I was a very wealthy out-of-state business man. That's the only fucking reason I cut my beard off. I wouldn't want them to guess I'm not a respectable citizen. I can't understand what's respectable about a man who wants a child bride." I shivered



in revulsion then ran my fingers over the shoulder holster hidden by my suit jacket.

“If I need you, I’ll say, ‘that’s not what we agreed to’ and try to pull Mariska to safety.” I tapped the microphone that looked like a tie tack. When Tiny winced, I knew he picked up the sound in his ear bud.

A black SUV pulled in the lot and moved to the back of the building. I followed the email’s directions and waited five minutes. Checking my watch, I got out of the car and walked to a boarded-up window.

My suit would probably get torn going through the small opening. I didn’t give a flying fuck. I hadn’t worn it since my grandfather’s funeral and would never don it again.

The old store was dark, and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. No one was around. This would be a waiting game then. I didn’t call out, only waited patiently. I heard the whimper of a girl off to my left, but never moved an inch. Those bastards would have to expose themselves.

“Mr. Rickman?” The man’s voice sounded further away than the girl’s cry of distress.

“Doctor, actually. But yes. I’m Rickman.” I figured it didn’t matter if the asshole knew my professional title. Once I had Mariska, I hoped that Tiny would nab him. After that, he’d be questioned. Never to be seen again.

“We’ve received your payment for item number 752681. You’ll find your goods approximately ten yards to your left. The key to unlock her is close by. It was a pleasure doing business with you.” Fucker acted like it wasn’t a human we were discussing.

“How do I know this is the same bride I ordered?” Viking was afraid they’d do a bait and switch. I had to make sure it was Mariska before I left the building. “I have a very specific type, and I wouldn’t want to lose the money I already paid if I have the wrong...order.”

A sound of frustration came from the man. “We wouldn’t stay in business long if we didn’t keep customers satisfied.”

“I know nothing about how long you’ve been in business. I’ve searched a long time for the perfect wife. For all I know you’ll disappear, and I’ll never see my money or acquire the girl I paid for.”

The man grunted in disgust. “Here, I will shine my cell phone light on her. You may approach your purchase, but only close enough to verify it is the correct item. I’ll shoot you and her if you try anything stupid.”

God, I couldn’t believe this exchange was taking place. Never in my life did I think I’d be buying a human or quibbling over it with the asshole who held her hostage. It didn’t sit right. I was queasy as hell.

I took a few steps to my left toward the sound of a sobbing female. All I wanted to do was grab her and go, even if it wasn’t Mariska, this child was traumatized and needed my help.

“That’s close enough.”

A light shone on the young girl. It was dim, because the cell phone was fairly far away. Her long, unkempt hair looked to be the same color as the photo I had seen of Diana’s niece, but I couldn’t see her face. “Look at me.”

I heard her cry of fear and her voice trembled. “Pl-please. Don’t.”

I found the soldier deep inside me, the fearless biker who was hardened to the world. I barked, “I said, look at me, girl.”

I hated sounding harsh, but I needed to make sure it was Mariska. I wanted the seller to think I was an asshole capable of purchasing a human. Only a sick mother fucker would buy anyone, especially an underage girl. That type of man wouldn’t be sweet or kind.

Her body began to shake with her sobs, but she raised her face. Even though she was thinner, dirty, and had swollen eyes from crying, there was no mistaking that I was looking at Mariska Stanton.

Even with the dim cell phone light, I could see her covered in filth. The only thing clean on the girl was the path down her

face from tears and a wide, pale ring around her neck. Her abductors were bastards, and I'd make sure they'd pay.

“Okay, it's her.” It was a signal to Tiny that the right victim was here. Since he had to text Fox the information, I needed to stall the seller for a second longer. “What if I find her unsatisfactory? What recourse do I have?”

“This isn't Macys. If you don't like her, you do what you want with her, after all she's your property now. But, I'll do this; since your payment was received quickly, you'd be more than welcome to shop with us until you find a girl that suits your needs.”

“Is that normal? Unsatisfied buyers who become repeat customers?” I wanted to grab the son of a bitch and squeeze his balls until his eyes exploded in his head.

“You know what you're getting when you place your order. We state that their personality isn't guaranteed. If you wish to rescind the agreement, just back away, but there will be no refund.”

I cleared my throat. I didn't want to risk Mariska's life by antagonizing the fucker who could be holding a weapon. “No. She's exactly what the picture promised. I'll go through with the purchase.” The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

“I'm glad we have reached an agreement. I have broken protocol by letting you get too close to the item. Stand where you are, count to one hundred before you get closer to her. Then, you can search for the key.” The voice was getting more faint. I could hear the asshole's footsteps as he jogged to get away.

I grabbed my phone and turned on the light looking around the area for the keys to the handcuffs that held her to an exposed pipe. I could hear her quiet sobs. I leaned down close to her face, quietly shushing her. “Mariska.” I whispered.

The girl gasped. “How did,”

“Stop talking.” I murmured. “Diana sent us to rescue you, but you need to stay quiet. Until I'm sure that fuc, um, that man is out of the area. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, yes.” I heard her gulp. “He tossed the key over that way, toward your left. It sounded like it hit wood before it clinked on the concrete.”

I moved my light around until I saw a glint of silver. I had just picked up the key when I heard a man’s grunt of surprise. I ran toward Mariska, needing to free her. My first priority was her safety. I didn’t know what the seller might have on him as a weapon, but I was certain he had one. I wasn’t even sure if there was just one enemy skulking in the dark.

I’m ashamed to admit that my fingers were shaking as I tried to unlock those fucking handcuffs. It took me way longer than I liked to undo one shackle. Not even worrying about the second, I untangled the metal from behind the pipe, shoved the key in my pants pocket, and grabbed Mariska. I half dragged her as I ran across the empty space toward the covered window.

The board was attached from the outside. I rammed the wood with my shoulder, making a wider spot for us to escape. The cracking of wood greeted my ears just as a gunshot rang out behind me. I threw my body between the girl and the gunfire.

None too gently, I pushed her through the opening and toward the car. “Get in, lock the doors and curl up on the passenger side floor. There’s a blanket, cover up to hide. Whatever you do, don’t show yourself.”

Mariska grabbed my arm. “Where are you going? Please don’t leave me here alone! I don’t want them to get me again.” I could hear her voice shaking, see the wild-eyed look of sheer terror.

“That gunshot could’ve been aimed at my brother. I can’t let him bleed out if it was him. Just climb in the car and I’ll be back as fast as I can. I promise you.”

Mariska jumped in the backseat while I opened the front door and rummaged through the glove compartment. Finding a decent size pocketknife, I handed it to the girl. “Anyone besides me or a huge guy named Tiny tries to touch you, slice

whatever skin you can reach. If all else fails, kick, scream and stab ‘em in the balls.”

I threw the cover over her, locked the doors and slammed them both shut. I reached for my gun in the shoulder holster. I was at a disadvantage rushing into the dark interior from the bright outside.

I closed my eyes and tried to listen as I carefully entered the abandoned retail store. Hearing no movement in my vicinity, I ducked through the opening. I bent my elbows so my gun would be near my cheek. Slowly, opening my eyes, I looked around the empty room.

Moving as fast as I could, I headed toward the direction where I’d heard the seller leaving earlier. I wished to fuck I had my trusty biker boots, the dress shoes I wore had slick soles and were anything but quiet on the industrial tile.

I had to tiptoe more or less, to move silently. The closer I got to a hallway, the easier it was to hear the thumps of fists pounding on flesh. I just prayed it was Tiny doing the punching.

When I turned the corner, I headed toward the sound of the fighting. Tiny was holding up a fat, bald man by his shirt front. There was a second man, hitting Tiny in the back. I cocked my gun pointing it at the stupid fucker. “That’ll be enough, asshole.”

The asshole in question turned toward me. In his right hand he held a knife covered in blood. Well, fuck. When he lifted his arm to throw the blade at me, I took my shot. I watched the hand that held the dagger nearly explode. He screamed in pain then dropped to the ground holding his profusely bleeding limb to his chest.

“Tiny. Do something with that bald fucker. Either kill him or tie his ass up. I need to see how bad he got you with that knife before you bleed out.”

“I’m fine. I say we take them both back to the compound. I want to question them and I know Razor will do his best work.”

Razor's name was earned. I had seen some of the cuts he'd put on others during interrogations. It was damn near artwork, although mostly it was to torture them. As the doctor of the MC, I had to patch them up between his sessions. It didn't take long for some to break, others, I spent long hours bandaging and stitching.

"Great. Do what you got to, but we got Mariska and I need to get her back to Diana." That seemed to get him moving. Using one beefy fist, he rammed it into the temple of his bald prisoner, knocking him out cold. That's when I realized Tiny was just playing cat and mouse with the unfortunate man.

Taking off my tie, I used it to make a tourniquet. Afterward, I usher the one-handed asshole to the car, all while Tiny dragged the unconscious bald man behind him.

"We gotta put them in the trunk. I don't want to scare Diana's niece. I'll make sure to tie them up, especially that one. He might bleed to death otherwise. Good shootin', Doc."

"Thanks. Just dump them in then I'll look at your back. You do know it appeared he was stabbing you, right?" I suspected that Tiny had CIPA, a rare condition that didn't allow a person's pain-sensing nerves to work. He could literally be hit by a bus and never feel it.

"Really? Damn. Okay. Now that you mention it, I'm feeling a little weaker than normal."

As he tied the men up, I pushed the button on the fob to unlock the doors then open the trunk. I called out to Mariska before opening the door. She threw the blanket off, dropped the knife and sprung from the floor into my arms. She was quietly sobbing and hanging on to me like a spider monkey.

"Hey, you're safe now, Mariska. We have two of the men who took you and once we get them back to the compound, we'll find out everything we need to know to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else." I gave her a gentle squeeze then made her get in the back seat of the car. She tightened her hold.

“I have an injured man that I need to look at. I got to put you down to do that, okay? I don’t want a good man to die, Mariska. Can you help me?” I felt her nod against my shoulder as she released me.

The trunk shut and Tiny walked up to us. He looked very pale. “Are you doing okay, big guy?”

Mariska gasped and reached for the blanket in the back seat of the car. “Maybe he should lay down on this. If he passes out, I don’t think either of us can get him up again.”

She had a valid point. Running to the other side of the car, I pulled out my emergency medical kit. As I knelt on the ground next to the blanket, I reached inside my bag and pulled out my burner cell.

“Tiny, on your stomach.” I gave my phone to the girl. “Go to the contacts, hit Fox’s number. Tell him who you are. Let him know that Tiny’s been hurt and I need some prospects or someone who’s free to come to the old KMart. If he asks, the password is snake. Got it?”

Pulling up Tiny’s cut, I cursed when I saw his blood-soaked t-shirt. He was losing blood quickly. I prayed the knife hadn’t punctured his kidney. If it did, we’d be in a world of shit. He’d have to go to the hospital. I was damn good, but his injury would be more than my field medicine could treat.

Once I lifted the hem, I used gauze to wipe most of the blood from his back. I was relieved to see the injury was a deep cut to his side. After a quick examination, I didn’t see any punctures or other injuries.

“Tiny, you don’t seem to have any stab wounds, but you are bleeding heavily from a deep gash on your side. You need stitching up. I’ll pour some betadine on you then begin stapling.” I was already pulling the medical items from my bag.

“Okay, Doc. Whatever you think is best.” His voice was slurred from losing blood. I didn’t bother with gloves. I’d had my hands inside bikers for decades, usually because I didn’t

have a choice. Emergencies didn't always happen when latex gloves were close by, no matter how prepared I tried to be.

Mariska sat on the other side of Tiny. "What can I do to help?"

After dumping half a bottle of disinfectant over the deep wound and surrounding skin, I used the other half on my hands. "Tiny doesn't feel pain, but he's lost blood. I need to roll him on his left side to close the wound. Grab that bottle of water in the front cup holder."

Jumping up, she ran to do I told her, then quickly came back. "Good girl. Now sit down and lean against the car."

We carefully rolled Tiny to his left side so I could get a good angle to work on him. "Put his head in your lap. See if you can get him to sip on water while I'm working on him."

Mariska did everything I asked of her. She gently moved so her thighs were under Tiny's head. She brushed her fingers over his shaved head. The kid coaxed him into a sip then started praising and scratching his thick beard like a dog. I had to hide my grin. Diana and her sister did a good job in raising that girl. She was strong, compassionate, and a helpful kid.

I began the process of stapling the large open gash on Tiny's side. I felt myself sink into the job, focusing on my patient. I could hear Mariska talking but her words were background noise. I didn't even hear the rumble of motorcycles.

"Oh, shit." Mariska's frightened voice had me looking up. "Their vests have a different name on the back than Tiny's. Are they going to hurt us?"

I spared a glance over my shoulder and saw Cub and two other Wicked Warriors headed our way. "No, Mariska. It's okay, I'm sure Fox arranged for them to come. They're the closest MC to us."

"Wow, Doc, fancy duds." Cub knelt down next to me, grinning. "You clean up good for an old fucker."

"Language, butt munch. That girl is only sixteen." To prove my point of her immaturity, she rolled her eyes. "Cub



Kodiak, this is Mariska Stanton.”

“Sorry. But if she’s going to be around your crew, she better get used to cursing.” Cub winked at the girl. If I didn’t know he was so in love with his wife, I’d have knocked him on his ass for flirting. As it was, that was just his personality.

Putting in the last staple I looked at the Warrior. I knew I had to stomp out any crush that a sixteen-year-old might get on the big, good-looking biker. “How’s your old lady?” Just as I hoped, Cub’s face lit up like a Christmas tree at the mention of Amber.

“She’s fuc, uh, freaking amazing. We just found out we’re gonna be dads.” Mariska looked confused. If Cub wanted her to know he and his two brothers shared a wife, he’d have to do the explaining. It wasn’t my place.

“That’s great! How are the twins taking the news?” The Kodiak brothers had adopted seven-year-old twin girls a year or so ago. It was eerie how much they looked like the Kodiaks’ woman. No one would guess they weren’t biologically related.

“They’re so excited. Sarah thinks it’s going to be a girl. Marah says it’s going to be one of each since me and Parker are twins. I don’t know how I’d feel about that. Four kids in that cabin with me, my brothers, and Amber?”

“Got to build on anyway with all those kids you’ll have.” Tiny was sounding better, but still weak. “Between the three of you, you’ll keep Amber pregnant.”

“Shove that bottle of water in his mouth, Mariska.” I stood up, wiping the blood from my hands on my pants. My knees and back were screaming at me but I’d keel over and die before I’d let these men see my pain. “I have two men in the trunk. One with his hand blown off, and the other one I’m not sure what his injuries are. Tiny had a hold of him.”

“Sounds like we need to get you guys back to the compound, then. We’ll help you load Tiny in the backseat then escort you home. Dexter, call some prospects down here.” Cub was panting from helping me put Tiny in the car. “You guys

clean up the mess here and in the building. I don't want a single drop of blood for DNA evidence left behind. Got it?"

"On it." The twenty-something kid nodded and was already dialing on his cell. He walked away to talk.

I reached out a hand. "Thanks, Cub. I appreciate you guarding our backs and helping with Tiny."

"You'd do the same for us. We're brothers, man." He shook my hand then whistled for his crew to mount up. I helped Mariska get in the passenger seat. I handed her the key to unlock the remaining handcuff.

"Oh, God, with everything that happened, I forgot to tell you!" Mariska was getting frantic. "From the moment I was taken, they put this collar thingy around my neck." She reached up and ran her fingers over the wide clean area of her throat.

"They would shock us if we didn't do everything they said. I've seen them use it to kill one lady who tried to escape. If they find out what's happened, they might kill the others."

Fuck. I tossed the phone back to the kid. "Call Fox back and tell him." Then I hit the gas leaving skid marks on the parking lot as I headed to the compound.

## Chapter Thirteen - Viking



BEFORE SETTING OUT on our rescue mission, we debated on the best way to approach the warehouse. A dozen bikes would be heard coming from far off, so the element of surprise was out. Unless we parked and jogged for a mile. That wasn't going to happen.

Razor reminded me that anyone who saw armed bikers going inside the building could call the cops. It was essential we move quickly. But we were determined. Cops or not, traffickers hearing us coming or not, it didn't matter. We had people to save, and we'd do just that.

As we drove, I went over the rudimentary plan in my head. It wasn't much, but I felt confident we could pull it off. I trusted my crew completely.

It was decided that we'd ride up to the building and make entry as fast as possible. We had two teams that would split up and do specific jobs. DB, Razor, and Cowboy, or team one, would enter first, search, and take out the threats. Team one had been military trained and had excellent gun and combat skills.

They'd text me updates so I'd know how many were injured or killed, and how many captives we were saving. Me, Brass, Eagle, and Sampson would be on rescue duty. We weren't former military, but we were pretty good with guns and fists ourselves.

The rest of the crew would float as needed, and even keep a lookout for cops, or escaping abductors. At the compound, Fox would track Doc and Tiny while coordinating with

Johnson, who was now going by Reaper, who'd relay what was happening with us.

The ride to the abandoned warehouse was tense. The unknown is always scary, even for me. After Hailey died, I tried hard to cut off my softer emotions, do and say things with a clear head. My focus had become riding, fucking, and drinking. Not always in that order. Love, kindness, all the sweet shit that made me human, I tried to bury under layers of apathy.

After meeting Diana though, it was like someone ripped a bandage off a festering wound. All I felt were raging emotions, spinning me out of control. When a motorcycle hits a patch of ice, the driver can only hold on and pray the helmet and leather would protect them from the worst injuries. That was where I was at; praying I'd padded my heart enough to protect it.

Fuck. I needed to get my head out of my ass and concentrate on the job at hand. People depended on me, kids had to be saved. Assholes had to go down. I rolled my shoulders as the large building came into view. DB, Razor, and Cowboy sped past me each heading to a different entrance.

Parking my bike, I dismounted and checked my phone. A message from Reaper stated that Mariska was safe. That was good news. I removed my helmet and put it in my saddlebag. Now to clear this damn building and save the victims inside.

I grabbed my gun from the belt holster and released the clip. Setting the bullets by tapping it against my head, I reinserted it and pulled back the slide. I felt my pockets to make sure my extra magazines were still there. I had no idea how many people were inside. Targets *or* victims.

Reaper moved beside me and leaned in close. "Just got more info from Fox. Tiny's been injured and the Warriors sent three of their crew to guard their backs. They're headed to the compound."

"One mission completed. I hope ours turns out the same way."

Reaper grinned, “Yeah? Which one of us should get injured on this crazy scheme?”

I pretended to consider his question. “I volunteer Brass. Test those brass balls of his.”

My new member snorted a laugh. “He’d probably cry like a bitch.”

“I’ll tell him you said so.” The sound of gunshots rang through the building. My heart sped up; my crew had silencers.

I used my arm to block Sampson, who had come running from behind me. He was dead set on getting inside the warehouse. “Stop. Give it a second.”

I could hear his grunt of disgust. Waiting wasn’t his strong suit. Sampson charging into unstable situations was one of the reasons he wasn’t on target duty. He was smart, cunning, and ruthless, but in the heat of battle he was what we called a Berserker: no plan, just attack.

After waiting for what seemed an eternity, I hadn’t heard more gunshots. My crew also hadn’t checked in. Our ramshackle plan had just got blown to shit. I’d made the decision and waved my hand for team two to enter the warehouse.

This part of the building had no windows like the pictures Fox used to find the captives. Then again, this complex had an office at one point. I was certain that’s where the pictures on the sale page were taken.

It wasn’t as dark inside as I thought it might be. LED lights were strung along the high ceiling. Someone must be paying an electric bill. That disturbed me, but I had to put that thought on hold.

My nose picked up the scent of dirty laundry and raw sewage. These poor kids were kept in unbearable conditions. Worse than a sideshow petting zoo. On top of being peddled like animals, they were treated like them too. Someone was going to painfully disappear after my MC got a hold of them.

Taking a quick look around the area, I was shocked to see makeshift 'rooms' made out of cheap plywood walls nailed to four-by-fours. I wasn't a construction worker, but I could see the only thing holding up the sides. were two-by-fours. The roof of the building was a good thirty feet high, the rickety walls seemed pointless.

Why wouldn't anyone just walk away? Nothing here was strong enough to hold prisoners, even weakened ones.

My thoughts were brought up short when a gunshot rang out. I heard DB shout, "Motherfuck! Grim, I need you."

Without thought, I ran toward my Veep's voice, worried he'd been in the line of fire. I plowed my way into one of the filthy ramshackle rooms. Near the wide entrance, I saw DB on the floor, his hand wrapped around a young man's arm. Blood was seeping through his fingers. Beside them, a man lay motionless with a bullet hole through his forehead. The small six-by-six space was cramped but the cement floor was quickly turning red.

Grim came running, a large duffle bag in his grip. "What happened?" He used his foot to move the four by four and the entire structure shifted, giving him more room to work. The fucking walls weren't even attached to the floor. Every room was maneuverable.

The boy wasn't crying or trying to move away from the growing blood puddle. He lay still as big bikers surrounded him. DB shifted positions to let Grim kneel, but didn't remove his hand from the bleeding child. "I was just about to clear this last area when that asshole," he used his head to indicate the dead man, "shot at me hitting this boy in the arm. I took him out."

Grim looked at the kid. "I'm going to take a look at your injury. Don't worry, I look like a homeless old fart, but I know what I'm doing." The kid gave a wan smile.

"What the fuck is that thing around his neck?" Sampson was bending over to study the collar, while trying to stay out of Grim's way.

“Looks like a shock collar.” Grim dug through his bag and pulled out a pair of scissors similar to what I’d seen nurses use to remove clothes. “Get on the other side of DB and see if this will cut through that material. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Knowing I couldn’t help in this situation, I left to secure the rest of the warehouse. Inside each wooden space there was only a five-gallon bucket, and a thin mattress on the floor. No blankets, no pillows, and no doors.

I holstered my gun and looked around in amazement. Of the few rooms I’d seen, one held a nearly full bucket of human waste. My gut told me this was the room Mariska had been held. The collar around the injured kid’s neck gave me a clue why these kids couldn’t just walk out.

Turning from the empty room, I took my time studying where these prisoners were kept. So far, none held people, and most had been cleaned up. Well, the buckets were empty, but nothing else was clean, including the mattresses. Dark stains from God knew what was on each one.

In the next room I entered, I noticed a kid sitting in the corner. He or she had their arms wrapped around bent legs, their head resting on their knees. Dark wavy hair and dirty arms and hands were all I could see. I couldn’t be sure it was a girl, but that was my gut feeling.

“Hey.” I spoke quietly. This kid had been through trauma even I couldn’t comprehend. Along with their abduction, and being held hostage for God knew how long, they’d heard gunshots today.

Now they were surrounded by tattooed bikers. It probably seemed like the end of the world instead of a rescue.

A feminine voice sounded from the next cell. “Don’t take it personal with Helen, she won’t talk to you.”

I backed away and entered the area that I heard the voice coming from. A girl of indeterminate age was sitting cross legged on her thin pallet. I was just astounded that she wasn’t screaming, or begging for help. The more I studied her, I saw a

hardness in her eyes. This person had seen some shit, and lived to tell about it.

“I’m Viking. What’s your name?”

The girl shook her head. “You have no idea what you’re doing to us do you?” She pointed to the collar around her neck. “Your dumbass thinks you’re rescuing us, but you’ve just killed us.”

Frankly, I was sort of pissed that she wasn’t grateful that we’d killed her abductors. I noticed real fear as she looked toward the ceiling. I glanced up to see round, dark objects over each makeshift room. I turned my attention back to the girl.

Suddenly, her body fell backward to the mattress, grew stiff, then began to convulse.

I ran forward, grabbing her by the shoulders, trying to hold her flailing body to the mattress. Blood began to stream from her nose. “Grim!”

I heard him shout in alarm just as our phones started lighting up the sound of messages. Reaper ran in. “Get the fuck out, now!”

“I’m not leaving her.” I was shouting.

“You have to, or she’ll die. Along with the other two. Viking, trust me.” Reaper sounded scared as he pulled on the back of my cut dragging me on my ass toward the nearest exit.

I jumped up, grabbed his throat and shoved him to the nearest metal wall of the warehouse. “What the fuck? You wanna die, man?” I was shaking in my rage.

With rounded eyes, he held up his phone so I could read the messages on the screen from Fox.

*Jamming collars now. Leave the building to give me time.*

My heart sank. “Fuck.”

“Outside, everyone! Leave the kids. Now!” The men grumbled but didn’t fight me as we ran for the door.

Grim followed behind, a haunted look in his eyes. “Kid didn’t make it.”



Sampson walked up to me, a haunted look in his eyes. “Viking, I’ve seen some fucked up things, we all have, but this, man. These guys have to be sophisticated for this kind of set up. This is some next level shit.”

This entire setup wasn’t good. “There are the two men taken out at Doc’s location. What’s the count here?”

“Three killed, one injured, and who knows about the crew behind the cameras. So far three hostages counting that boy. Four total, if you count Diana’s niece. I didn’t see if there were more, but I counted twelve spots to hold captives but didn’t have time to check for more occupants.”

I shook my head. “The places I saw were empty, even the buckets were clean. The boy who died, the girl with the dark hair, Helen according to the girl I was talking to when shit went sideways, and Mariska.”

“We discovered twelve areas and four known prisoners. With the photos of kids on the sales site that we *didn’t* find inside,” Sampson took a breath.

I interrupted, “we missed saving seven others.”

## Chapter Fourteen – Diana



THE FACT THAT Viking wouldn't let me come with him to rescue my niece, made me furious. Then, when I watched the MC gathering guns and knives, I knew he was right. I would never get over the violence that could take place. I had a hard time killing bugs in the house. Stabbing or shooting someone was beyond my capabilities. Even for Mariska.

Sure, I might do it in the heat of the moment. I knew myself, once everything settled, I'd be wracked with guilt. Better to let the MC handle that part of it.

These men could kick ass and never blink. I knew they'd do whatever necessary to save Mariska and any other innocent person. They may be dangerous men if you crossed them, but to me they'd been saviors. Viking had been my salvation. It still didn't calm my nerves.

My heart was torn. I wanted them to come home unfazed, but I wanted them to do everything possible to bring home my niece. As the MC headed toward the door, I called out, "Be safe!"

Viking stopped before exiting the clubhouse and turned on his heel. Grabbing me by the shoulders, he kissed me senseless. It almost felt like a goodbye.

I broke the kiss and leaned back to gaze into his eyes. "Gunnar, I,"

He stopped me by placing his fingertips over my lips. Gunnar gave me a gentle peck on the forehead, and without a word he walked out of the clubhouse.

Now I was trying to sit still in Fox's office, or 'Fox's Den' as the sign above the door stated. It was impossible. My knee bounced until I made myself get up. Immediately I paced. And paced. I have to give him credit, Fox never said a word to me about it. Then again, he was so focused on the electronics that surrounded him that I don't think he realized I was there.

The few times I heard his phone ping with messages, I practically climbed over his desk to find out what was happening. It was so hard to breathe it felt like my ribs were bound. The knot in my throat made it hard to swallow. If my heart didn't slow down, I was certain I'd have a heart attack.

Finally, Heather came in and held up a shot glass full of clear liquid. "Drink it."

"What?" I couldn't process what she was telling me to do. It was early in the day, and she wanted me to take a shot? I stared at the drink then at her, but never made a move to take the alcohol.

"You're so stressed out. You're going to make yourself sick. What good will you be to your niece if you're flat on your back. Now drink this tequila or I'm going to force it down your throat." She held the small glass up between us. "You know I'm right."

"Heather, I can't get drunk. Things might go wrong, and"

"Who said anything about getting drunk? Look at me. Do I seem worried to you? No, I don't." She raised her hand, bringing the drink next to my face. "I have zero doubts that this MC will rescue your niece. Now. Drink."

I took the shot and tossed the contents into my mouth. I swallowed as fast as I could, but the burn traveled down my throat to my stomach. My eyes watered, and I had to stifle a cough.

Within seconds, warmth spread through my body. I handed the glass back to Heather. "Thank you." My voice was hoarse, but I did feel slightly calmer.

"Look, Diana, I've never been where you are emotionally. Hell, my parents were never home when I was growing up and

I'm an only child, so I don't know what it's like to worry about a blood-bonded family member. But, these guys? They're my chosen family. I trust them, and I know they're going to get Mariska back to you safe and sound."

Fox's phone rang. "It's Doc." He answered and listened before grabbing a second phone and typing a message. "Got it. Don't worry I have guys close. Tell Doc he's covered." Disconnecting the call, he looked up.

"What's happened?" The tequila felt like it might come back up.

"That was Mariska, she's fine and out of danger. Tiny was hurt though, and Doc needs help."

I wasn't sure how to feel. My joy of Mariska being rescued was dampened by knowing someone was injured saving her. "My God! Is she okay? How bad is he?" I reached out and grabbed Heather's hand in mine.

Fox took his eyes off the electronics to look at me. "You can talk to her once shit settles. I'm not sure about Tiny, Mariska didn't go into details. I know he was cut on his right side. But, with Doc there I have no doubt it'll be fine. He's the calmest under pressure of any of the MC, and he's a hell of a doctor."

I wanted to hold back the tears, but they spilled over my cheeks anyway. "I hope he's going to be okay. I'll never be able to repay him or any of you, for what you're doing. Thank you just doesn't seem enough."

Heather squeezed my hand, but Fox smiled. It changed his looks from a serious twenty-something geek to a devastatingly handsome man.

"Doc saved my life once. That's one reason I joined the MC. I knew the members had to be alright if one of theirs would save a nerdy guy like me." Fox's phone pinged again, drawing his attention. "But that's a story for a different time."

The wait was killing me. "It's okay. That was one of the Wicked Warriors telling me they're with Doc. Tiny had a deep gash, Doc is stapling it on site, and they'll escort them here."

He was typing as he talked. “I just let the prospects at the gate know so they’re on the way. I texted Reaper too.”

Heather ran her hand up and down my arm then led me to a chair. “It sounds like everything is going good, hon. Don’t feel sorry for Tiny. He’s one of the toughest bastards I know. Just take a few deep breaths. Do you want another shot?”

My first instinct was to say no, but I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. There was no way I could do that since Heather was going to hover around me. She meant well, but I nodded my head.

Heather left my side to get my drink from the bar. I closed my eyes trying to slow my breathing and heart rate. Viking’s face came to mind, telling me to breathe with him like he did during my last panic attack.

Fox’s phone rang again. I could hear him talking and at first, I didn’t pay too much attention. Then his voice rose in alarm.

“I’m looking at the warehouse and scanning for remote signals. Fuck, it’s been activated.” He dropped the phone and began to type. “Diana, grab my phone and text this to Reaper, ‘Jamming collars now. Leave the building to give me time.’”

I wanted to ask what he meant. The frantic look in his eyes stopped me. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He went from furiously typing to his fingers almost blurring. I’d never seen Fox acting like this. Calm and quiet, I was used to. Swearing up a blue streak was new.

Fox finally breathed a sigh of relief. “Hand me the phone.”

I realized I was grasping it to my chest, my fingers white. Reaching out a shaking hand, I let the biker take the burner from me. I found a chair and sank into it, my legs weak and unstable.

Laying the phone on the desk, he hit the speaker. I could hear Viking when he answered the call.

“It’s safe. I jammed the signal to their collars. They started at a low shock but I could see the signal increasing the longer you were inside. I could’ve stopped it faster, but the amateurs

tried to attach a Trojan to trace any IP that interfered. I reversed it though.”

“What you just said makes no sense, but what I do need to know is how do we remove them? Those collars are attached very tightly around their necks and maybe made of leather with a large solid metal latch on the back. We’ve looked but can’t find a keyhole or any opening.”

Fox tapped his fingers on the desk. “I’ll call Doc. Mariska might have insights.”

Having worked in retail, I wondered if the locks could be similar to what we used on expensive merchandise to set off alarms if someone was shoplifting. “It might be a magnetic lock. If it is, there is a gun-shaped device that would release the mechanism. I’ve used similar things to attach anti-theft devices. I don’t know if that’s what would release the collars, but it’s worth a try.”

“Now that you mention it, kitten, it does look similar, only oversized. Fox, get on that call to Doc. I’ll check around the building. First, I’m getting the kids out of there. Get someone to bring a cage here to get the survivors.” The call was disconnected.

I slumped in my chair. Fox used his cell. When I heard my niece’s voice, I jumped up, closing the distance between me and the phone. I began to cry so hard I couldn’t form words. Fox asked about the collars, but suddenly words burst from my mouth.

“Mari, baby, are you okay?”

“Addy? Oh my God!” I heard her start to cry. In the background, Doc was trying to calm her and telling her to focus on Fox’s question.

Mariska took a few deep breaths, “The collars,” she sniffed, “I don’t know how it worked. The lock was on the back so I couldn’t see what they were doing.”

Fox looked at me. “I’ll text Viking. You can talk with her now.” He started typing on a second phone.

“Mari, are you okay?” I held my breath.

“I was so scared.” Her voice was nearly a whisper, but I could hear it trembling. “I don’t remember how I got from the mall to that, that place.”

“It’s alright now, Mari. You’re safe.” I tried to put every bit of confidence into my voice. She needed to understand that she was out of danger.

Mariska let out a long breath then sniffed. “I know. Can I talk to mom?”

“She’s not here, baby. I’ll make sure to call her as soon as we get off the phone. I’ve been looking for you, Mari. I’ve been in town since you disappeared. Your mom has been at home in case you called or showed up there.”

“I didn’t, I’m so sorry.” She began to cry softly. “I’d never do anything to scare you guys like this. I’d never leave or run away.”

“I know, honey. I know. It’s all over now. You’re safe and pretty soon, I’ll be hugging you.” I could hear Fox talking in the background, Doc was also saying something on Mariska’s end. “Doc said we’re at the gate. I’m almost afraid to hang up. What if I’m dreaming?”

“I’ll stay on the phone with you.” I stood up and nearly jogged to the front door. The pain in my right ankle was forgotten. I twisted the knob and moved to the small yard. I could hear motorcycles getting closer. I tiptoed trying to see the car Doc and my niece were in.

I tried to think of anything to say that would fill the time. “How’s Tiny?”

“He was cut pretty deep but never even moved when Doc stapled him shut. I see you!” The phone went dead when the car was just in sight. I saw the door open and the car coming to an abrupt stop. My niece came running. Within seconds she was in my arms, both of us crying and holding tight.

I knew she was as tall as me, she wasn’t a little girl, but feeling her against me, I realized she was grown yet still a child in so many ways. She would always be my little Mari.

My girl was thinner, her long dark hair hung in clumps from being unwashed. I could tell she hadn't bathed in the time she was taken, but I didn't care.

Doc pulled up and signaled for some men to come to the car. Together they helped Tiny from the backseat. The bikers started to put his arms over their shoulders, Tiny jerked away from them both. They settled in behind him, as he walked.

I backed away from Mariska slightly. As they passed me, I put my hand on his arm. "Thank you, Tiny. I'm so sorry you were hurt."

"This? Nearly nothing. Once I get a few beers in me, I'll be fine." He winked then headed inside.

Doc stopped beside us. "Mariska, your aunt can take you inside and Heather will show you where you can clean up, but I need to ask you some questions when you're done, okay?" He placed his hand on my shoulder then turned and went inside.

"Come on, let's get you a long hot shower and some food in you. You'll feel better." I kissed her temple and led her into the clubhouse.

I sat in the bathroom while Mariska showered. She didn't want to be alone, and I could understand that. Not much was said between us, but knowing she was close helped me feel calm.

Once Mari was clean, I helped her comb out her long hair. Even though we brushed most of the tangles before she washed up, it still had snags that needed to be worked out. We headed downstairs. In the main room, two plates were on a coffee table. Thick juicy burgers and french fries were waiting for us.

No one else was around. We ate in silence but sat so close on the couch that we touched from ankle to shoulder. With me being right-handed and her left, we could eat without bumping into one another.

I'd never seen Mariska eat so fast in my life but didn't say anything. Who knows what she may have eaten these last few



weeks. When her plate was clean, I gave her my fries. She had just finished when Viking and Doc walked into the room.

“How you feeling, Mariska?” Doc had changed from his dirty, bloody suit back into jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. I noticed his long beard was neatly trimmed. It made me sad to see the braids gone.

Mari wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Better, thanks. How’s Tiny?”

Doc sat in a recliner across from us, and Viking took up the spot next to me on the couch. “He’s going to be fine. Doc gave him some antibiotics and we’ll keep an eye on it to make sure it doesn’t get infected. Tiny doesn’t feel physical pain.”

My niece nodded. “I remember Doc saying that.” Tears welled up and fell over her cheeks. “I don’t know how to thank you. I hate to think what would’ve happened if you hadn’t, I mean, you know. Bought me.”

Viking reached across me and took Mariska’s hand in his. “Listen, we didn’t actually purchase you. We got our money back, so no one owns you. But we need to know everything you can tell us about the people that took you and the others you were with in that warehouse.”

Fox came into the room. “I hate to interrupt, but I called Mariska’s mom. She wants to come see her. Should I give her directions or what?”

Viking looked at Doc. “Since you know firsthand that Mariska is okay, ride to Bella and escort her here. That way you can answer any questions she might have about her daughter’s condition.”

“Got it.” Doc stood. “Text me Bella’s address, Fox.”

Fox and Doc left the room. As I watched them leave, thoughts swirled in my brain when it landed on the obvious. “Wait, where are the kids you rescued?” I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about them.

“I have Heather and the other women taking care of them. They’re getting cleaned up, fresh clothes and food, just like

Mariska. Everyone is doing everything possible to help them, I promise.”

“Can I go see them?” Mariska was wiping the tears from her face.

Viking took a deep breath. “Not yet. We need to talk to each of you to get as much information as we can about the men who held you. I think we’ll get better information from everyone when you’re separated. That way you’re not influenced by what others saw or remember.”

I saw sympathy in his eyes when he glanced at me. “Look, Mariska, we only found three hostages there. Do you know if there were more there at any other time?”

“It’s hard to say.” My niece scooted deeper into the couch and seemed to shrink in size. She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs and continued.

“Even though we were in the same building, we never saw one another very often. We could talk but we couldn’t say our real names or where we were from. They monitored everything and they’d shock us with those collars. I do know I only saw three different armed men. They took turns bringing us food and replacing the,” her face turned pink, “the buckets.”

Jesus, what kind of place did they keep her in? By her reaction, I knew what the buckets must have been used for. It made me sick to think Mariska had been subjected to such humiliating circumstances. Worse would have happened to her if Fox hadn’t found Mari on that website. And if Viking hadn’t had his MC rescue her? I fought a shiver.

“Can you describe the men you did see? It would help us to know if we saw the same guys. I’d like to get a count of how many people are involved.”

Mari shook her head, a look of fear on her face. “I won’t tell you anything else. I can’t.” She hugged her knees tighter to her chest. “Besides they all wore those ski masks that hid their faces and wore gloves.”

Viking moved to kneel on the floor in front of Mariska. “I know it’s going to be hard on you to remember, but you’re safe now.”

She looked at me and closed her eyes. “Addy, they made us,” a tear slid over her cheek. “I’m so sorry and so ashamed.”

I felt confused, but I wanted her to know that I loved her no matter what. “Mari, honey, those men can’t do anything to you now. Like Viking said, you’re safe. No matter what they did, I’ll always love you.”

“You don’t understand!” I was shocked by her outburst. “They might do something to me that will ruin my life. Stop asking!”

She jumped up from the couch, knocking Viking to the floor. Within seconds, I heard the door to the clubhouse open. I stood to go after her but, Viking stopped me.

“Let her go. It’s not like she can leave the compound and Fox can track her with cameras if she doesn’t come back.”

“She’s breaking my heart, Gunnar.” I shook my head and wrapped my arms around my waist. “I know she’s been through a terrible trauma, but Mariska has never acted like that. She’s so calm and sweet natured.”

Gunnar scratched his cheek. “You and I have no idea what she’s seen or been through. Everyone breaks, kitten. It’s how we’re put back together that determines how deep the scars go. Give her time.” He took my hand and led me from the great room. “Let me help pass some of that time. Tell me why she calls you Addy?”

I smiled despite the circumstances. “When she was a toddler, she couldn’t say Aunt Diana. I guess for a little kid, my name is hard to pronounce. It was easier for her to call me Aunt Dee Dee then she shortened it to Addy. It stuck for all these years.” We headed outside. I looked around for my niece but didn’t see her.

“I don’t know how to fix any of this, kitten. I do know that some of the men who hurt Mariska will never hurt anyone

again. We have two prisoners that were at her exchange being, um, questioned. I have no doubt Razor will get answers.”

His words were both comforting and frightening. I kept forgetting these men were used to violence. Who knew what else they did? I wasn't overly knowledgeable about motorcycle clubs, only what I heard through rumor, or fictional television shows. I was conflicted on many levels about the MC. They had a freaking arsenal the US Government would envy, but they'd saved my niece—saved *me*.

“You got quiet all of a sudden.” Gunnar's words brought me back to the moment.

I looked out over the compound. A line of motorcycles sat to my right, men in leather vests were roaming around smoking cigarettes and, by smell alone, not all of them were regular tobacco. I heard laughter, the hum of male voices in conversation, and off in the distance somewhere a female moan. What I didn't hear was men being tortured. But I knew that was happening somewhere on this property.

Everything about this place was a contradiction. Just like the man standing beside me. He was brutal yet showed me tenderness. Gunnar was no doubt dangerous, but very protective. Why did I find that combination so sexy?

“I'm,” what could I say to him? I opted for brutal honesty. “I'm wondering why I feel so drawn to you when I'm not sure why I should even trust you.”

## Chapter Fifteen - Viking



I STOOD THERE with my ass in my hands, not knowing what to say to Diana. I probably focused on the wrong part of her statement. “What do you mean you can’t trust me? Kitten, I’ve done nothing to make you *distrust* me.”

“I don’t mean like that.” She sounded like a kid who got caught cheating on a test. In the short time I knew her, I’ve never heard her sound so unsure of herself.

“What exactly do you mean, then? I didn’t even know you when I rescued you from that alley. I could have just left you there, but I brought you to my home, and shared my bed with you instead. In all this time, I haven’t asked anything from you.” Her words angered me, but for reasons I didn’t want to think about. She was under my skin, but I didn’t want to feel anything more for her than lust.

“Twice, Diana. I’ve put myself and my brothers’ lives on the line for you, and you tell me that you can’t trust me. Unfucking believable.”

“Gunnar,” she sighed and turned to sit on a bench next to the clubhouse building. “I used the wrong word. I trust you. I do. I guess I don’t know how to explain what’s going on inside my head.”

“Why don’t you try, because I’m getting pissed off.” I could feel my blood pressure rising.

“I like you. A lot. And I don’t know your lifestyle very well, except for stupid fictional streaming shows and an occasional news story about clubs going down for extortion,

drugs and illegal gun running, even murder. Part of me doesn't care about any of that because you and the guys have been so kind to me."

"So, what's the problem, Diana?" I moved to sit beside her on the bench. "The way I see it, trust isn't the issue."

"It's not, not like that. My problem is I don't trust myself to just enjoy the moment, this attraction and not get my heart broken. You don't seem like the type to settle down, and my life is so boring in comparison to what you have going on here. Now that Mariska is safe, we'll be going home. Part of me doesn't want to leave without more happening between us. The other part is telling me to just move on and forget about sexy Viking, the president of the Merciless Few MC."

I opened my mouth to respond, although I wasn't sure what to say. The sound of a motorcycle broke the tension between Diana and me. I knew it was Doc bringing Diana's sister, Bella.

"You don't need to leave right now. Stay for as long as you want. I need to talk to you about this." I stood when Doc pulled up with the club's cage right behind him. The back door flew open, and a woman stepped out. She looked similar to Diana, but with a smaller build. She also carried a bitter expression to her features. I'd never seen my kitten look that way.

"Where is Mariska?"

I understood that this woman had just gone through weeks of hell on Earth. I even knew it had to be the most difficult time of her life, not knowing what happened to her daughter. Even understanding all that, my hackles were raised by her attitude.

I turned to face the woman. "She's taking a walk."

Diana moved from behind me and launched herself into her sister's arms. After a few minutes of crying, they broke apart. Bella gasped when she got a good look at her sister's bruises.

“Oh, Dee.” Bella’s gaze shifted to me. “Did he do this to you?”

Anger surfaced like a tidal wave. “I’ve never beat a woman in my life.” Meeting Bella, I wondered if that might change in the near future.

Doc strolled up to us, a frown on his face. “Keep a civil tongue, woman. This man saved your sister *and* your daughter. Do you have cause to think he’d hurt her? No, you don’t. You’re judging him based on his appearance.”

I watched Diana’s reaction as Doc addressed her sister’s accusation of me. I had the feeling no one had ever dressed down Bella and put her in her place. Someone needed to and Doc seemed up to the task.

The flash of anger in her eyes grew and the woman turned and moved toward Doc until their chests bumped. “Don’t you dare tell me how to react. I’ve just been through weeks of hell. Seeing my sister all bruised,”

Doc grabbed and kissed her. I watched the fight drain out of her as Bella wrapped her arms around my medic’s neck. When he finally pulled back Bella looked flummoxed. Doc looked surprised.

“What just happened?” Diana was staring at the couple. Her whispered words broke my stupor.

“I think your sister has met her match. And my medic has found his.” I didn’t know if I should be shocked at the display or be happy. In all the years I’d known Doc, he never seemed interested in a woman enough to kiss her in front of the MC. He’d hooked up occasionally, but it was always private. I’d never seen him bring a woman around the club.

The moment was broken when Mariska called out, “Mom!”

We all turned when she threw herself into her mother’s embrace. Diana joined in the group hug. I felt like an intruder so I motioned with my head to Doc that we should go inside. We headed to the bar and let Heather pull us two cold brews.

I didn't say a word as we downed the beer. Doc never looked my way. We sat in silence, both of us lost in our thoughts. Besides, his kiss with Bella was none of my business. Even if I couldn't understand why he might be attracted to a harpy. Diana and her sister seemed to be from two opposite ends of the spectrum in temperament.

"So," Doc began, "about what just happened."

"Bro, that's not my fucking circus. You can kiss whoever you want." I swallowed the last of the beer in my mug and shook my head when Heather offered me a refill.

"I don't know what came over me. I didn't plan on it and I was just as surprised as you were."

I shook my head. "I doubt it, Doc." I glanced over, expecting him to grin, not look like he'd just swallowed a nest of yellow jackets.

Doc looked up to Heather and asked her to leave. She nodded then headed toward the small kitchen area, giving us the privacy Doc requested. He still looked around to see that we were alone, even though we were, he leaned a little closer to me.

"Listen, you know I'm a combat vet. I learned during war that life is short. I've seen boys, just out of high school get blown away right in front of me. Grown men cry like a baby when they're injured on the battlefield. Do you know how many tough ass soldiers cry out for their mom when they think they're going to die? You just don't know if you're going to be normal tomorrow, or if you will even wake up." He looked uncomfortable as he cleared his throat. "I've realized that I don't want to be miserable while I'm living and breathing."

"Whatever you're about to say, know two things. One, you're like a brother to me. Two, short of murdering one of ours, nothing you say can shock me." I meant it. Doc wasn't just a brother in arms, but my chosen family.

He put his head down avoiding my eyes. "Gunnar, I'm bi. The reason you've not seen me with any women around the



club is because I leave to hook up with men. I have been with both sexes, but mostly men lately.”

“Wow.” I was wrong, what Doc just told me was a shock.

“If you want me to leave the club I will.”

“What? Why would I do that? You’re a valuable member of this club, man. What you do on your time is none of anyone’s business. I’m just taking a moment to process it, that’s all. Nothing’s changed. You’re still my brother.”

“Look, I know most clubs don’t like gays, and even though I like women too, they might just see me as a guy who has sex with men. I don’t want to cause any trouble and I sure don’t want the club to look at me differently now.”

“And why the fuck do they need to know? It’s not like you need to explain to them why you kissed Bella, or how that bothers you, or you know your, bisexuality. Don’t take this wrong, but you didn’t need to tell me either.”

Doc sighed. “When I was overseas, I tried to deny that part of me. Hell, before I went to Iraq I pretended half of me didn’t exist. But after witnessing the horrible ways a man could die or become disabled, I didn’t want to reject half of who I am. Even though I keep it to myself, I’m not completely miserable denying that part of my sexual needs around the clubhouse.”

“I caught that one word, Doc. You’re not completely miserable. Completely. I don’t like that you’re not totally happy.” I regretted not getting that second mug of beer. I never thought I’d be discussing something like this with one of my crew. I didn’t care that Doc liked guys too, but it did take me by surprise.

“Come on, Gunnar. How many of the crew bring bitches here? But, even if everyone *said* they were okay with me being bi, how well do you think they’d take it if I brought a guy home to fuck.”

Doc’s words had me blushing. I was dead on red-faced hearing him say those words. I fidgeted in my chair, knowing he could sense, if not see, my embarrassment.

“Even if I brought a dude here, it’d be as uncomfortable as hell. I can’t allow that part of myself inside those club doors, and you know it. So, no, I’ll never be completely happy. Over my life, that’s a reality I’ve learned to live with.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “It shouldn’t be that way, but I know you’re right. Honestly, I don’t know if everyone here *would* be okay with it either. That sucks, man. I can’t imagine what it’s like to never completely be yourself around your own home. This is going to seem like a crazy question to ask now, but what does this have to do with kissing Bella?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t even think she was attractive at first, all loud mouth and attitude. When she first saw me riding up with the cage, she stepped back and made a face like she’d just taken a big bite of shit on toast. It went through me like a spear. But as she stood outside, giving me the business just now, I had this overwhelming urge to spank her ass red and fuck her into next week.”

I grinned at his confused look. “You’ve always liked a challenge and you seem to be a take-charge kind of guy. In fact, you’d make a great president of your own club chapter. Maybe Bella brings out that part of you. If you’re a Dom, maybe you recognize a sub in need of discipline. And just because men have been your recent conquests, you do like women too.”

“Maybe.” Doc nodded. “I mean that makes sense. Something about her got under my skin the minute she wrinkled her nose at me and acted like she needed someone to teach her basic manners.”

His eyes glazed over as he talked about Bella. I wanted to protest that she was just a bitter woman that would bring him nothing but problems, but it wasn’t my place.

Besides, I was the last person to go to for romance advice. I had one woman I loved that took part of my heart when she died. Then there was Diana. How could I give insight in matters of the heart to anyone when I was so conflicted about my own love life.

“I’m sure you two will figure it out. Speaking of woman troubles, I need to find Diana.” I stood and turned to leave.

“Gunnar.” Doc’s voice stopped me. “Don’t push away the only woman who makes you feel the way Diana does. I see it in the way you treat her that she’s not just another bitch to take to your bed. She might be worth the heartache you are trying to avoid.”

I stood there, with my back to Doc glad he couldn’t see my panicked expression. I couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that Diana would break my heart way more than losing Hailey ever did. “I’ll try. That’s all I can promise.”

## Chapter Sixteen - Diana



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Bella and I walked around the large compound. Mariska was between us, holding each of our hands. I wanted to ask her details of her kidnapping, but I wasn't sure how to bring it up. She'd been so upset when I brought it up before. I didn't want to add to her trauma.

"I'm sorry I've been snapping at everyone. It's just, everything that happened to me and some of it's just so humiliating." Mariska sniffed. "I want to talk about it, but I'm afraid you guys will hate me."

"Baby, I'm your mother." Bella stopped walking and moved to stand in front of her daughter. "You could murder someone in cold blood, and I'd fight like a banshee to protect you. I'll always love you."

"Mari," I began, "you know I'd never stop loving you or feel differently about you. I held you in my arms when you were minutes old. I watched you take your first breath. I may not have carried you in my body, but I love you as if I'd given birth to you. Don't underestimate how much your mom and I care about you."

I hoped she'd feel reassured by Bella's and my words, but she let out a wail then started to sob. Mariska would have fallen to her knees if Bella and I hadn't been surrounding her. Together we gently led her to the ground and wrapped our arms around her. After several minutes, she finally settled down.

"I don't remember anything after going into the dressing room. I only remember waking up on a lumpy, hard mattress.

The first thought I had was someone dumped me near a port-a-potty or an alley or something, it smelled so bad.”

As she talked, she began to slip into her memories. Her voice became flat, emotionless as she relived her experience. “It was so hot and almost dark. I started to call out for help but something was so tight around my neck it was hard to make a sound. I reached up to pull whatever was there off of me, but I couldn’t get my fingers under the wide strap. I heard a voice and I could tell it wasn’t a person nearby. It sounded like it was coming over a speaker.”

Mariska crawled a few feet away then sat facing us, with her legs drawn to her chest. She rested her forehead against her knees before raising her face so we could see her haunted expression. “The voice said I could get my collar loosened, but I’d have to earn it. I could barely breathe or swallow. I think I’d have done anything so I could feel like I wasn’t suffocating.”

“All I had to do was take off my clothes and, and,” she began to cry again. I wanted to comfort her, but she shook off my hand from her shoulder. Mariska’s voice changed to a tone I’d never heard from her. Deep anger and shame rolled off her as she continued.

“Don’t you know? Can’t you guess what I had to do?” She wiped her nose on the back of her forearm.

Fearing I knew what happened, I kept my mouth shut and tried to school my features. I let her tell the story. The truth had to be eating her up inside.

“I had to stand there and strip naked to display my body, even turn around and bend over and spread my butt so they could see everything. Then I had to lay on that stinky mattress and touch myself until they told me to stop. They said they videoed it all so if I ever escaped, if I ever told on them, they’d put all of that on the internet and send it to my family and friends.”

Bella moved closer to her daughter and ran her fingers through her hair. “Sweetie, even if they did that, videoed it I

mean, you did what you needed to survive. Anyone, including me, would've done the same thing."

"Mom, do you know how embarrassing, how mortifying it would be if my friends saw that? Oh my God mom, I'd want to die. Just telling you and Addy about it, I want to throw up."

I reached out and took Mariska's hands in mine. "Listen to me. I can't imagine what it feels like to be put in that position. And who knows if they really got a video of you or not? Trust me, there are worse things on the internet than a naked female touching herself, forced to do it or not. You are alive, Mariska. And even if those assholes somehow showed that video of you at Times Square, something else would come along minutes later and steal people's attention."

My niece gave a humorless chuckle. "Addy, I appreciate that, I do, but you have no idea what it's like knowing someone has something so disgusting hanging over your head. I feel like there's an ax about to fall and my entire life will be ruined at any second."

I heard a man clear his throat and turned to see Gunnar not too far away. "Mariska. I heard what you told your mom and aunt. Don't freak out." When she started to jump to her feet, he reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder.

He knelt to bring his eyes level with hers. "I don't know what you're going through, but I think I can help. Come on, we need to go talk to Fox."

"Wait one minute. You think I trust you enough to drag my daughter away from me when she's clearly so vulnerable?"

Gunnar's attention shifted to my sister. I saw anger flash in his eyes. He took a moment to calm down before he spoke through gritted teeth. "You don't know me, so I'm going to chalk up your reaction to being so upset. I've let you talk to me like a damn dog twice now, but this is the last time I'm going to put up with your attitude."

Without another word, he stood and guided Mariska away from us and into the clubhouse. I grabbed Bella's arm before

she could stalk after them. She turned toward me, ready to fight.

“What’s wrong with you Dee? Sure, he’s good looking, and he looks like he’d be a good lay, but it’s not like you to let a man run over you. How do you know that he’s not behind all this human trafficking to begin with?”

Shock at her ferocity made me speechless. Then, too many emotions to name washed over me and I took it all out on my sister. “Are you serious? What the actual fuck is wrong with you? That man saved me from two attackers.”

I poked her shoulder. “Then the men inside that building put themselves in harm’s way to save Mariska, one even had to be stapled shut after his side was sliced open. Your daughter helped Doc do it. The rest of the crew planned and went after the assholes who took Mari in the first place. Plus, you have no right to say I’d spread my legs, then just roll over for any man.”

“All I’m saying, Diana, is you don’t know them any more than I do. How do you know they aren’t behind it? I mean you were in Charleston looking for Mariska for weeks, but they not only found her but rescued her within hours? That sounds sketchy to me.” Bella raised her chin in stubbornness.

“For what purpose, Bella? You’re making no sense. It’s not like they’ve gained a damn thing by helping me or saving Mari. They didn’t ask for a red cent, or demand anything from me in return.”

I couldn’t understand where she was coming up with her ridiculous notions. Sure, my heart was on the line here, but not because I thought Gunnar was a horrible creep. Just the opposite. I was afraid he’d not want me the way I did him.

“They haven’t demanded anything yet, Dee. Just you wait, I’m sure they’ll come up with some scheme. I’ve heard about motorcycle clubs and how they treat women. They’re considered property, Diana, not humans. Men like them own strip clubs, bars, and do all sorts of illegal things. What makes you think this group is any different? What makes you think

they don't own the operation that stole Mariska in the first place?"

"You have no right to judge anyone on their lifestyle, Bella. But I do know that from the moment the Merciless Few came into my life, they've been nothing but helpful. They saved my life, and Mari's. The fact you don't give a crap about that bothers me. You are wanting to be right so bad, that you overlook the good they've done while obsessing over rumors of bad things. You know what? I'm done talking." I stormed off, not even caring where I was going.

I'd never been so disappointed in my sister as I was now. She didn't care that these men weren't all bad. Hell, she wasn't all good. No adult on this planet was a perfect angel. Certainly not me.

No angel could have the dirty thoughts I did for Gunnar. Besides, good people do bad things sometimes. So what if Gunnar's motorcycle club owned a strip club or something. I knew they didn't run a human trafficking ring.

The wide property surrounding the clubhouse held several houses and was surrounded by a thick crop of trees. It was really beautiful. No wonder the club wanted to make their home here.

"My Old Man used to run this place." I turned at the sound of the female voice. "I'm not exactly sure where he's buried though."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I felt that this woman could be dangerous, but I kept my fear to myself. At least, I hoped I did.

The woman cracked a smile. "Don't be sorry. He was a son of a bitch. Beat the living shit out of me every chance he could. I hated him, but he kept the worst men of the club from raping me."

She shrugged and moved toward me. "The club ran drugs and guns and allied themselves with the Aryan Nation. They even kidnapped girls and kept most of them for Mingo Blankenship to put on the black market."



“I didn’t know anyone from this club could be that horrible.” My heart dropped. Could Bella be right about the Merciless Few? I didn’t want to believe it of Viking and the guys I had met. Fox, Tiny, Doc, and the rest didn’t seem the type to hurt women that way. And they sure didn’t seem like racists to me.

The woman snorted. “I’m talking about the club that created this compound, The Soulless Bastards. Viking along with a few other clubs came in and wiped them out. My Old Man, Rommel was killed before that happened though. Best day of my life, watching him bleed out. I’m Nancy, by the way.”

I wasn’t sure how to react. Shaking hands seemed wrong. Hugging was definitely out. I just nodded to acknowledge I’d heard her. Nancy no doubt knew who I was already. “So, you’re familiar with the motorcycle club lifestyle then.”

“I grew up nearby, my dad was a low-ranking member of a different club when I was a kid. I don’t remember much about it, but I romanticized the club scene. Bad boys on motorcycles, flipping off the cops and doing what the fuck they wanted. It sounded great to a teenage girl.” Nancy fell in step with me as I walked along the grounds.

I couldn’t help but smile. “What is it about bad boys that makes us women swoon?”

“Hell if I know.” Nancy shrugged. Her eyes took on a haunted look. “Fantasy is better than reality. Real bad boys don’t have a soft side. They’re motherfuckers all the time.” She cleared her throat before continuing.

“I met Rommel when I was fourteen. He was in his twenties at the time. Before I knew it, I was living in the clubhouse with him and the Bastards. It really became a normal way of life. The drinking, drugs, the fights, and all the women. Before I hit fifteen, I’d seen women getting fucked willingly and gang raped if they weren’t. It stopped bothering me at some point. I can’t even tell you the amount of blood I’ve cleaned from the floors and washed out of clothes. It has to be gallons of it.”

“Didn’t your parents come looking for you?” I was trying to hide my shock. Nancy didn’t look any older than me. She might have been younger, but the years of neglect and abuse could have aged her appearance.

“I don’t know if they did. I wasn’t able to leave the compound for nearly a decade. When I mentioned my family, Rommel would punch me in the face and remind me that the Bastards were my only family now. He made sure I remembered who I belonged to. After a few beatings, I quit asking.”

“But you were only a child! At fourteen, I was barely done playing with dolls.” I couldn’t hide my revulsion. At the time she moved in with the Soulless Bastards, she was two years younger than Mariska.

“He was a sick fuck for sure. He liked to bring in some young girls, like young as twelve, and rape them in the clubhouse so everyone, especially me, could see him. His crew would be holding me there so he could look right at me while he was doing it. Rommel would tell me to be glad he was doing it to them and not me. Like I said, I’m glad he’s dead.”

“I hate to say this, but I’m glad too.” I wondered why she was telling me all this, and I told her as much.

Nancy took a deep breath then sighed it out. “Look, I’m no angel. This has been my home for fifteen years. These guys aren’t perfect either but they’re damn sure better than many clubs I’ve encountered. Honestly, I hated the lot of them when they took over. I couldn’t imagine they’d treat me any better than the other bikers, so I fought them tooth and nail. Even after I could tell they weren’t like the Soulless Bastards, I fought them. I had been repressed for most of my life, and I guess I liked the feeling of doing what I wanted without getting my ass beat.”

I nodded. “I have no idea what it was like for you, but I can understand that.”

Nancy put her hand on my forearm and stopped walking. “Viking has issues with settling down with any woman. I heard from the other women here that his dad killed his

girlfriend, and he will never be over losing her. I just want you to know that he isn't going to change. Not for anyone, not even you. If you want to save your heart, don't give it to Viking."

"Keep your goddamn mouth shut, Nancy." Viking's angry voice made me jump. "You just can't help but stir shit, can you?"

The other woman didn't so much as flinch. "Tell me—tell her that I'm wrong. I'm not trying to stir shit. You aren't telling her everything that she should know. I like her, and I see the way she looks at you. She don't deserve to be jerked around, Viking." Nancy turned and walked away.

"Is she telling me the truth, Gunnar?" I held my breath, waiting for him to deny it.

"My dad did kill my girlfriend, so I left West Virginia. I just recently came home when my piece of shit father died." He shrugged. "As for the rest of it, she isn't too far off from the truth. I don't know if I can allow myself to fall in love again."

## Chapter Seventeen - Viking



I WATCHED DIANA'S face carefully to gauge her emotions. Did she want more than a night of passion? I know she said she was afraid I'd break her heart. But what more could I give her than my honesty?

"Why can't you, Gunnar? Was your girlfriend that special that there's no room for someone else in your heart?"

I cleared my throat. Remembering Hailey while standing beside this amazing woman was almost my undoing. I felt trapped between my past and the present. "I don't have an answer for that. I guess there are a lot of feelings inside me that I've buried."

Diana looked away, but not before I saw the tears shimmering in her eyes. "Unless you face the past, there won't be room for me in your future. I don't even know if you'd want that, so I guess I'm getting ahead of myself."

"Look, kitten, I like the hell out of you. I fucking admire the way you put yourself out there to find Mariska. I can't get over how strong you've been from asking strangers about her, to fighting off two attackers."

"Gunnar," she turned tortured eyes to me. "Stop before you follow that statement with 'but' because I only want to remember you saying such beautiful things about me."

Even though I was the cause, the hurt was rolling off her. I wanted to do everything in my power to stop it. I reached out and took her hand. "I want to tell you that I'm ready to settle down, take you as my Old Lady. I respect you too much to say

what I think you want to hear. I might not ever be that guy who wants one woman until my last breath. Right now, I can't imagine opening myself up that way."

Diana stiffened her spine and inhaled. "Then don't. I think we both know where we stand. I'd like to be more than a passing thing for you, and you don't want anything permanent. We're mature enough to understand sex doesn't mean commitment. I want you, Gunnar. I do *not* want to leave here and regret not having you when I had the chance."

I brought her knuckles to my lips, wanting to say anything that would sound poetic or charming. Diana didn't expect that of me, and I knew I couldn't suddenly become the sweet and romantic type. I simply nodded and led her through the clubhouse. The great room was empty and we didn't see a soul on the way to my room.

Once I shut the door and locked it, I stared at the gorgeous woman standing just out of arm's reach. "Diana, I need you to be sure you want this."

I'd had nothing but meaningless sex in almost twenty years. I always assumed my partner was okay with a bump and go. But Diana was different. She was important to me, and I didn't want her to get hurt.

No. I didn't want to hurt her.

"Gunnar, I'm not a starry-eyed kid who thinks sex is the ending of a romance novel where the two main characters go on to live happily ever after." She reached for the hem of her t-shirt and pulled the soft cotton garment over her head. Her generous breasts were covered by a plain beige bra, but I'd never seen a sexier woman. Lace was overrated in my opinion.

Diana reached behind her to unhook the bra.

"Wait."

She shot her gaze up to look at me. I could feel my dick pressing against my jeans, begging to be free. Moving forward, I forced my eyes to stay locked with hers. Using my fingertips, I lightly traced her arm from her wrist to shoulder. "Just, let me."

Her skin was warm as I placed the palm of my hand on the back of her neck. Diana's hands moved up my stomach to my pecs, her fingers curling into my shirt as I brought my lips to hers. The kiss was gentle, a brief touch, then two. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pulled her tighter against me. I felt her surrender.

We had kissed before, but this was different. I'd never needed to bring my partner pleasure, so she'd remember this moment for the rest of her life. God, I knew I would. I broke the kiss to nip and lick over her jaw and down her neck. Diana groaned as I slid her bra straps over her shoulders.

Reaching behind her, releasing the hooks, I bared her from the waist up. I'd always been an ass man, but God, her entire body was a turn on for me. Second only to her mind and determination. Diana was incredible, and I had to show her physically, because telling her was too much.

Slowly, I trailed my fingers over her skin, my lips following. I lost track of time as I undressed her and kissed each inch of flesh I uncovered. Diana clawed at my shirt, pulling it from my body.

We both panted and groaned as we fought to remove my boots and jeans. Once I was naked, we tumbled onto the bed. I was lost in her scent. Hearing her moans, and little cries guided my movements as I sucked her nipples and fingered her to her first orgasm.

Raising my head from her luscious breasts, I covered her body with mine. I settled between her spread legs. She arched her back as I slid inside her warmth. God, she felt like heaven. Her heels settled against my thighs as she undulated beneath me.

My hands framed her face as I kissed her, brushing my thumbs over her cheekbones. I felt her skin warm under my palms as a light sheen of perspiration covered us both. I moved faster inside her as I chased my release. I opened my eyes just as she did. Emotions rolled over me as I watched her come apart, our gazes locked.

This was the first time I'd seen a woman cum. My balls drew tight watching as Diana's face and neck grew rosy. I was fascinated as her mouth opened when she moaned in pleasure. It was life changing. I felt myself tumble over the edge, and I gave into my body's demands.

Looking into Diana's eyes as I came was the most intimate thing I'd ever experienced. It formed a connection on a soul deep level. I thought I loved her before, but now I knew it. This was real love. Not the lust and dependency I'd had with Hailey. The scariest part was realizing we both felt this way. I could see the feeling mirrored in her eyes.

I rolled off Diana and pulled her into my arms. Her ear pressed against my chest, over my rapidly beating heart. I felt her arm across my stomach as she settled in. I was just drifting off to sleep when I realized that I had made love to Diana without a condom.

I'd never gone bareback with any woman. I had condoms stashed in my wallet, my night table, and my medicine cabinet. Hell, the club kept a large fishbowl in the great room filled with every condom ever made. The thought I just fucked Diana without one should've made me sit up screaming, but I fell asleep with a smile on my face.



Six months later

THE SOUND OF flesh meeting flesh was nothing compared to the feeling of Double Barrel's fist connecting with my jaw. Stars danced in my vision as I shook off the urge to pass out. Men shouted in encouragement, but I didn't need it. I growled as I charged the big man, spearing him and bringing us both to the floor.

DB was a big man, but I was fucking angry. Straddling his waist, I began to pound his face and ribs until someone pulled me off. I turned ready to attack the man who'd had the audacity to end the brawl.

“Goddamn, Viking! You were supposed to fight with him, not kill your Veep!” Tiny’s voice did little to bring me back from the brink.

I angrily turned to stare at DB. Doc was beside him helping him to sit up. My sparring partner was barely conscious. The medic looked up and I could see real anger in his expression.

“Fuck. I’m sorry, DB.” I deflated as I watched my Vice President grasping his ribs when he moved. My stomach clenched when he turned his head and spit blood from his mouth. “I don’t know what happened. I saw red and lost control.”

Doc was boiling mad. He stood quickly; his body nearly vibrating. I thought he’d take a swing at me. Fighting was something the crew did regularly to hone skills and blow off steam.

Doc was the healer. He sat back and waited to patch up any of us who needed it. Right now, he looked ready to rip my head off. “I know what the fuck happened, Viking, but you refuse to do anything about it!”

“I’m not ready.” I began to rip the tape off of my hands. “She’s the one who ran off in the middle of the night.”

After spending hours in her arms, I woke up ready to confess my love to Diana, but she was gone. She’d cleared out her meager belongings, grabbed her sister and niece and left the compound.

I’d gone from lovesick, to heartbroken, to fucking pissed off. I was still mad months later. I just couldn’t decide if I was angry at her or myself.

Doc turned to wrap DB’s ribs while Heather stood by with a rag to wipe the blood from his face. She avoided looking at me, but I could sense her unease. I stomped to the bar and



pulled my own beer from the tap. I downed the mug in three gulps before refilling it.

Nancy was sitting at the bar, scrolling through her phone. She spoke without looking up. “You do know you’ve been drinking your weight in beer lately.”

Belching, I slammed the half empty glass on the bar. “Yeah? And what does it matter to you?”

She laid her phone on the bar. “Me personally? It doesn’t. Except you’re the leader of this club, and what you do affects the others. This place has gone to shit since Diana left.”

She was right, though I didn’t want to face it. Brass arranged all the charity rides on his own, and those were few and far between. Only a few went to Blades or kept up with other MCs in the area.

Having the millions we lifted off the traffickers, made it so we could blow off the rest of the MC community and our responsibilities. And I didn’t want to socialize anyway. But my club needed me to be a leader.

Since *she* left, I hadn’t even gone over plans to open businesses for the MFMC. I drank and I fought.

If it weren’t for Sampson ordering the prospects to maintain the property, it might be falling down around our ears. DB had to take over my duties and kept in contact with Zero.

The knowledge Nancy was right, that I’d let down my bros, put me in an even shittier mood. I sneered at the woman, taking my anger out on her. “You can fucking leave at any time.”

Nancy stood up and leaned over the bar, bringing her face closer to me. She spoke softly so no one could hear her. “Yeah? And you could grow a pair and do what it takes to get her back, you idiot. But,” she grabbed her phone. “Take a bath first.” The bitch casually walked from the room.

Doc took her place, sitting on the stool Nancy had just vacated. He slammed his hand on the bar. When he lifted it, a crumpled letter-size envelope was on the bar top. “I’ve had

this for over a year. I thought I'd hang on to it for the day you were ready to read it. But because you're a shithead with a stubborn streak a mile wide, and you nearly killed a man just now, I'm tired of waiting. Read it."

"Read what?" I stared at the envelope like it was a rattler ready to strike. "How did you get it?"

My friend shrugged. "I'm a doctor. And I might have run into the medical examiner at a club. When we found out who each other was, he and I worked it out. He brought that to me, and I've had it ever since. Open it. Come get me when you're ready to ride to Van. Right now, I need to treat DB's injuries."

I heard his boots as Doc walked out, but my eyes never left the envelope on the bar. Setting the beer down, I grabbed the paper and almost ran to my room. What did I have to fear anyway? Nothing could change my past or stop the hurt I was feeling now.

Sitting on the bed, I stared at the sealed flap. Carefully I opened it and pulled out the papers. The first was a death certificate. I frowned as I skimmed over it. The name at the top was Hailey Ann McComas.

"Jesus."

I closed my eyes and tried to slow my breathing. I got control of myself and glanced over the document. She was so young. Then again, at the time, so was I. In so many ways.

Forcing my eyes to focus through the unshed tears, I read the cause of death. "Accidental overdose."

I shook my head in disbelief at the words I'd just read. She was murdered at the hands of my own father. The cause of death had to be mistaken.

I pulled a yellowed newspaper article from the envelope and read the headline, "Charleston Man Released from Prison on Reduced Sentence".

Quickly skimming through the article, I discovered my father waived his right to a trial. He pleaded guilty to murder because he felt guilty, he'd supplied the drugs that killed Hailey.

In prison, my father got clean. He attended a class with a group that helps inmates review their case and conviction. They thought he deserved a reduced sentence since he didn't commit murder.

A new prosecutor went over the case. Since my father pleaded guilty to murder, and the charge should have been involuntary manslaughter, the state reduced the charges and released him. I didn't totally agree with it, but he hadn't murdered Hailey in cold blood as I thought.

I sat back on my bed, the reality of what I saw versus what happened rushed over me. I saw one more piece of paper. I opened it, my heart constricting at the handwritten words.

*My dearest boy...*

## Chapter Eighteen - Diana



I TOSSED MY phone to the couch and sighed. “It’s no use.”

Mari looked up from her laptop, a frown on her face. “I’m sorry, Addy.”

“Oh, honey, it’s not your fault.” I got up and walked to the kitchen where my niece was finishing her schoolwork. Since she was rescued, Mariska hadn’t been able to leave the house and go to school. The county provided her with online courses so she could graduate. She was anxious enough without me inadvertently giving her a guilt trip.

“I’d walk away from a million jobs to make sure you were safe. I knew when I quit without notice, they wouldn’t rehire me. I’d do it all again to bring you home. I’m sure something will open up around here soon.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t sound happy. I rubbed her back when I noticed a tear roll down her cheek. “I hate to say this, but I’m glad you’re home with me. I know I shouldn’t be feeling so scared all the time, but I do. I sleep with you because I have nightmares. I’m such a baby.”

Mariska took a deep breath. “Addy, I wasn’t abducted from here, but I feel like anyone could just stroll in our house and take me. I felt totally safe at the compound—and when Doc is here. I just know he’d protect me if someone did break in.”

Doc had been coming by at least once a week, sometimes more, to check on Mari. They tried to keep it quiet, but I could tell he was in a relationship with Bella. She was a different

person, blossoming under Doc's attention. It made me miss Gunnar even more.

It had been just over six months since I walked away from the Merciless Few compound. Well, six months, three weeks and five days. But who's counting? And if I'm being honest, I ran away from Gunnar.

We had made love several times that last night I had been at the compound. I knew my heart was all in, but I couldn't face the rejection I'd get in the morning. After Gunnar fell asleep, I grabbed my stuff, threw on my clothes and tracked down my family.

None of us said a word as we made our way to my car. Mariska was pouting like a toddler who had her favorite toy taken, but she didn't scream the house down like I'd feared.

Even Bella wasn't happy to be leaving, and that did surprise me. I should've known then that something was up with my sister. When she'd arrived at the compound, she had been less than cordial.

The guys at the gate just opened it and waved as we drove off in the early morning light. I hadn't heard a word from Gunnar since. I couldn't blame him though. He'd made it clear that we would never be the couple I wanted us to become. But even still, I figured he wasn't just moving on, he was probably mad that I'd snuck off without a goodbye.

"Addy?" Mari's voice brought me back to the present. "I was talking to you, and you didn't hear a single word. Are you okay?"

I wasn't, but I didn't want to admit it to her. I simply smiled. "Sorry, Mari. What did you say?"

My niece closed her laptop and placed the textbook she'd been using on top. "I asked why we didn't just move somewhere else. I, uh, heard you and mom talking about the house and how the foundation is cracking because it's sliding down the hill. We're going to have to move soon anyway."

"Sweetie, I'm sorry you heard that discussion. It's not something that you should worry about. We have plenty of

time before we feel it's unsafe. Besides, the rent is affordable right now, since old man Lassiter dropped the rent when we pointed it out." I wanted to change the subject before Mariska got too stressed. Her anxiety disorder was improving, but she didn't need extra problems to worry over.

"Hey, it's getting late. I'll start on dinner." Mariska nodded then returned to her schoolwork. Not long into my cooking, the front door opened, and Bella came in. Her bright green scrubs barely made a noise as she moved through the room. After tossing her purse on the couch she stretched. The scent of antiseptic nearly drowned out the food in the frying pan.

She walked up to her daughter and kissed the top of her head. "That smells good. What's for dinner, Dee?"

"I'm frying veggies to make Philly Cheesesteak with the leftover roast. How was your shift?"

My sister had started working at a walk-in clinic until she could get on at the hospital. I know she hated working for that particular doctor, but we needed to catch up on bills.

Our finances had taken a hit when I quit work. It had been a struggle, especially now that I couldn't find a job and the school had replaced me in the cafeteria.

"It was fine." I could tell by her smile that she was lying. "I'm going to hop in the shower real quick before dinner."

The loud roar of a motorcycle sounded from outside. Like an animated cartoon, I watched Bella's demeanor transform. Her tired, pained expression turned to a doe-eyed young woman who was deeply in love. I tried to bury my envy.

Bella nearly skipped to the front door and threw it open. I glanced at Mari to gauge her expression. She was looking down, but I could see her grin and I relaxed.

My niece felt safe with Doc, and she genuinely liked him. I think Mari found a man she looked to as a father. The idea of her mom and Doc being together made her happy.

"I hope you fixed enough food for company." Bella sounded smug.

I'd give up my portion, if needed, to make sure everyone else was fed. Besides, there would be enough food for four people. "Of course I did." I looked up and the smile on my face froze then dropped.

Standing behind Doc and Bella was Gunnar. All the air left my lungs. After all the time that passed, my heart still beat for that man.

"Hello, kitten."

Mariska stood so fast, the kitchen chair nearly toppled. "I think I have to finish this in my room. I mean, the book. The book I need is in there, so I'm going there. To my room. I mean. I have English, but I need Science. Never mind." My niece hot footed it out so fast, I felt the air blow past me as she exited. She'd left her laptop and her English book on the table.

Gunnar took off his sunglasses. I noticed the fading black eye and the healing cut on his lip. Looking closer, bruises of various sizes and colors were scattered all over his face.

I started to inspect the damage, but quickly stopped. It wasn't supposed to be my concern. He made it clear we would never be a committed couple. Taking care of him fell squarely into the boyfriend/girlfriend column.

"Diana." He raised his hand and used a finger to trace the side of my face. Goosebumps raced down my body at his touch. "Go for a ride with me."

That was the last thing I expected to hear. It took me a moment to form words. "Um, really?" At his nod, I agreed.

We didn't speak as he helped me put on a helmet. I slid on the bike behind Gunnar and held tightly to his waist as we took off down the road. Having never been on a motorcycle, I was scared to death.

At first, I kept my eyes closed and my body stiff. The longer we rode, the more relaxed I became. After he patted my hand, I looked up. I started to see my state through new eyes. It's amazing how car windows wash out the colors and warp the beauty of our mountains.

I could tell we were leaving the rural area. The road became more congested with cars, and buildings were starting to pop up. We eventually pulled into a small, rundown cul de sac in the poorer section of the outskirts of Charleston. Gunnar pulled into the driveway of an abandoned house.

The one-story home had boarded up windows. Symbols and phallic shapes were spray painted along the warped siding. I could see the roof had fallen in on part of the house.

The lawn was now at least knee-high. I looked down and saw the driveway had cracks full of grass and weeds. I was sad that this once beautiful home was now dead from neglect.

It took a moment for my hearing to adjust when Gunnar shut off the bike. I couldn't see or hear children, only the deep barks of several large dogs nearby.

He sat still for a moment then dismounted and helped me do the same. Taking our helmets, he put them on the seat and reached for my hand.

"Where are we?" I felt his fingers intertwine with mine as we walked toward the back of the house.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Home."

Chills ran down my spine. This old house was falling down, but it was still taking up space. Just like Gunnar's memories still occupied too much space in his head and heart. And both places were dangerous to delve into.

Thoroughly confused, I asked, "Why did you bring me here, Gunnar?" We'd rounded the house and he pulled me toward a small, cracked concrete stoop. Wiping debris from the porch, he guided me to sit. He sat down next to me on the crumbling steps.

Gunnar quietly stared at the overgrown yard. I thought maybe he hadn't heard my question or wasn't going to answer.

Finally, he took a deep breath. "Kitten, I've been a miserable bastard since you left. I've been doing nothing but drinking and fighting. Doc finally had enough and gave me this." He handed me a crumpled envelope.



I looked at him before I lifted the flap. An old newspaper clipping fell to my lap. I read it quickly, learning that his father had been released from prison and why. My curiosity about Gunnar's past had me going over the rest of the contents. When I got to the letter his father had written him, I looked up to see Gunnar staring intently at me. "I don't know if I should read this. It seems too personal."

He laid his hand over mine. "I've never kept secrets from you, but I'll give you the gist of what he says. Basically, he admits to buying and giving Hailey the drugs that she overdosed with, and he's sorry that he let his addiction get between us. My father does take responsibility for her death, though. I found him on top of her, with his hands on her neck. In his drug-addled mind, he thought he was giving her CPR. He could no longer live with Hailey's death, and our estrangement. Dad didn't want to fall back on his addiction to bury the pain. So, he took his life hoping to find peace."

Gunnar's leg was bouncing as he spoke about the past. I placed my hand on his knee. "I'm sorry things never got worked out between you two."

He shook his head. "Yeah, well, Doc will be the first to tell you I can be a pigheaded prick." He looked at me and grinned. "I think you told me that you're a little stubborn too."

My amusement died when I realized we were still facing an insurmountable obstacle of his first love. "I'm, I'm not sure how this changes anything. You're still grieving over losing Hailey and it takes up all the space in your heart to let anyone else in."

"I spent months trying to forget you, Diana. I tried to drink you away. I fought my inner demons by pummeling my bros. These," he pointed to the contents of the envelope, "forced me to face my past. I relived it, made myself go through it all minute by minute. It took me a few weeks to deal with everything after Doc gave that envelope to me."

"Oh, Gunnar. I'm so sorry." My heart broke for the man who lost his entire world. "You've been running from that pain

for almost twenty years. I can't imagine how hard it was for you."

He scoffed and shook his head. "I thought it was important to make sure of how I felt. I wanted to take the time to really settle it all and come to terms with it."

Gunnar looked directly into my eyes, not even blinking. "Do you want to know the strangest thing? It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. After going over and over the entire situation, I wondered if maybe I was in denial about what I felt for Hailey, what happened to her, and my dad. Damn, I went really deep into my own head."

He turned away, crossing his arms. "What I realized is that those memories of my past, of that day, were built so big, they were hiding reality. I reexamined my relationship with Hailey. I remembered there were more bad moments than good between us. I'd known her in high school but didn't start dating her until we met up years later. She was a drug addict that I wanted to save. It wasn't really love that I felt, but a need to rescue her. I've wasted my life hanging on to memories that weren't even real."

Gunnar turned to face me again. Leaning on an elbow, he placed his free hand on my forearm. "What I feel for you isn't fake, it's not some fantasy I've built up in my mind. It's raw, and real. I thought I knew what love was, until I met you. Losing you brought me to my knees, kitten. I'm not saying it'll be easy for us, but I want to try. Because in this crazy, fucked up world, you're the one real thing that makes me happy." He raised his hand from my arm to cup my cheek. "I love you, Diana."

My heart was beating so fast, it's a wonder it didn't explode. Was he truly ready to explore a real relationship with me? In the end, I had to believe that he was.

I needed to trust him not to break my heart. Just as he had to trust that I would do the same for him. Isn't that what relationships really were anyway? Warm tears spilled over my cheeks. "Oh, Gunnar. There's nothing I want more than to be with you because I love you, too."

The smile on his face said it all. “Then, I want to ask you to be my Old Lady. And,” he reached inside his jeans pocket and pulled out something small. Sunlight glinted off the silver object.

“Besides wearing my property patch, I wanted to give you this ring as a promise that I’ll always be the man you need.” He slid it on my right ring finger. He looked up with a grin on his face. “I’m leaving the left one open for future rings.”

I held up my hand but couldn’t see the details through my tears. What I did see was a square sapphire center stone surrounded by thin silver filigree. It was the most beautiful gesture represented by a gorgeous ring. “Thank you, Gunnar. I’d love to wear your property patch.”

“Now, tell me you and the girls will agree to move out of that dangerous house and into the compound. I know Doc and Bella had talked about it, but she didn’t want to leave you stranded.”

I started to protest when Gunnar placed his fingers over my mouth. “Mariska already feels safe there, Bella hates her job and she’d be more help to Doc, and I want you in my bed every fucking night. Why do you want to stay in a house that should be condemned?”

“I’m not working, how will we make it without income. Besides, it’s too soon!”

“Too soon for what? Kitten, who cares what everyone else thinks? It’ll be you and me in my bed, not anyone else. And you don’t need to work. We lifted millions from the bank accounts of the traffickers, remember? So, what excuse can you make up now?” Gunnar was grinning.

He was right. It’s not like I was a young girl needing society’s approval. I was Gunnar’s Old Lady, and my place was at his side. “None. Let’s do it.”

## Chapter Nineteen - Viking



IT TOOK NO time at all to get all three Taylor/Stanton women moved into the compound. I also knew I had to build a house for me and Diana. There was a perfect spot in an overgrown area where nothing had been in the past. The guys were thrilled to clear it off rather than just maintain the buildings and yard work. The free beer I provided didn't hurt either.

To build the house, I contacted Dodge from the Black Dagger MC. His construction company had been extra busy but with Fox's detailed printouts of the house I wanted, Dodge didn't think it would take too long until we could move in.

Doc also wanted an addition to his little place. He'd expanded his family by two and needed extra bathrooms and closets. I couldn't imagine how it would be living with two women, but I think he looked forward to it.

Mariska was doing better in school, sleeping through the night with only the occasional nightmare, and her anxiety medication had been drastically reduced. She now kept in contact with her friends, but still didn't want to leave the compound to visit them. They did video chats frequently, though.

"Hey, boss?" DB stepped through the door of my office. "Camp and Dodge are here to see you."

I put up my ledger books, grateful for the break. Zero didn't tell me what work it took to be the president of a motorcycle club. Bastard. "Please, send them in. And ask Heather to bring some coffee. My eyes are crossed."

My Veep grinned. “Better you than me my friend. I got a taste of it. I was more than happy to hand the heavy crown of leadership back to you.” He turned and waved to my visitors.

I stood and hugged both men giving and receiving hard backslaps. “Is this about the house, Dodge?”

The man looked unsure but shook his head. “No, um, actually I’ll take half off the price if you do me a favor.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “Damn, who am I making disappear?”

“No,” Camp leaned forward and put his forearms on my desk. “It’s pretty much the opposite. We want to know if you’ll take in a new member.”

I was shocked. “Okay, why can’t you take him as a member in your own club?”

Dodge looked uncomfortable. “He’s getting out of jail for murder.”

“Well, a criminal past means nothing to either of our clubs.” I propped my chin on my fists. “Tell me what’s the big deal here.”

Camp leaned back. “Do you remember a week-long news series a few months ago on Jericho Hodges?”

I shook my head. I had been buried deep in my drinking and fighting stage at the time. “Nope. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Dodge took over the conversation. “Jericho is my younger brother. He went to jail for killing Chipmunk, um, Alvin Wayneright. He was a member of the Wicked Warriors MC. Turns out there was proof Jericho didn’t shoot Chipmunk, and the police didn’t turn that information over to the state. The cop in charge, Detective Martin, owed favors to the real killers and they set up Jeri as the fall guy.”

“Wait, I recognize Martin’s name. He’s the crooked cop who shot you right?” Dodge nodded at my question. “He also caused shit for another member of the Daggers too.”

“Yeah,” Dodge said. “He’s in prison now, not doing well from what I hear. But, now with the investigation into Martin, and my brother’s interviews by Les Carter having gone national, the state has dropped the charges. The issue is, we don’t want to ruffle the Warriors. Even though Jeri didn’t shoot one of theirs, it caused some tension between our clubs.”

I sat up in my chair and placed my hands on the desk. “I get it. I’ll put it up for vote at church and get back with you. I don’t see the guys not voting him in, though.”

Camp spoke up. “He’s got our MC tattoo.” He pointed to the black dagger that covered his entire inner forearm.

“Except,” Dodge interrupted, “his tatt has a spider on the handle. That’s what he picked for his biker name. Spider. Is that going to be a problem?”

I grinned. “Nah, I bet with the right artist, that ugly thing can be covered.”

Heather walked in carrying a tray with three mugs of coffee. “Here you go, boys.”

Camp smiled at his old employee. “Star. How’s it going?”

The former Silver Angel stripper smiled. “Good. Keeping these yahoos from tearing down the place keeps me busy.”

Dodge actually smiled. I tried to keep my composure. I’d never seen it happen and never knew the man was capable of that. “Bikers are hellraisers, but we have hearts of gold. When are you going to finally settle down with your dream guy?”

Heather outright laughed. “When I find the right woman.” She winked as she walked out of my office.

All three of us looked like bobblehead dolls staring at the empty doorway. We may have all been in happy, healthy relationships, but damn if we weren’t briefly fantasizing about her announcement. Dodge was the first to react. “Well, shit. That was unexpected.”

I swallowed. “But hotter than fuck.”

“What’s hotter than fuck?” Diana breezed into the room. I had a sneaking suspicion she knew. Women are like that; they

always know the answer before they ask a question.

“Did you know Heather is gay?” I didn’t sound as unaffected as I wanted.

Diana grinned. “You didn’t? You’d be the only one in this building who was clueless. Didn’t you see her dancing with that new girl. The pretty redhead who just started hanging out at the compound?”

“When I’m in the great room with the MC, I only see you.”

Camp started laughing. Dodge made a gagging sound. Diana smiled as I pulled her onto my lap. I trailed my fingers over the edge of her property cut. She looked damn fine with my name on her.

“That was exactly the right answer, Gunnar.”

The twisted road to my happily ever after started off rocky as fuck but circled back to Diana. I had everything I ever wanted; a great group of bros, friends who had my back, and the one woman who fit me like a broken-in riding glove.

Yep, I was the luckiest son of a bitch in West Virginia.

### **The End...of Viking and Diana’s story!**

Preorder Spider’s Web today! Delve into the captivating and heartbreaking story of Jericho Hodges. Set to release in November. <https://bit.ly/SpiderMFMC>

Download this free short story to fall in love with Doc’s unexpected Daddy Dom encounter with Bella. <https://bit.ly/DocsOrdersMFMC>

# Thank you for reading *Almost Heaven!*

This book was so fun to write. If you enjoyed it, I have several other MC books you might be interested in.

To read about Cub, Amber and the Kodiak Brothers, you need to pick up *Her Three Bears*.

And of course, Dodge, Camp, and Beast are featured in the Black Dagger MC series.

Besides contemporary MC romance, I write paranormal and sci-fi romance, if those appeal to you. Please note, my couples or poly relationships span the Kinsey scale of sexual orientation! A list of my books and their links are listed below. I've made note of the books that aren't MF romance.

I included my social media links and email address.



# Other books by M.D. Stewart

## *Psy-Bond Series*

[Mine](#)

[Ours](#) – poly MMF

[The Hunter](#)

[Saving the Elite](#)

## *The Watchers Series*

[Aoki](#) poly MFM

[Harliss](#)

[Talia](#)

[Crossing the Line Duo](#)

[Double Time](#) poly MFM

[My Forever Love](#) contains bonus MM to MMF story

[Fae Shifters Duo](#)

[Devitt](#) poly MMF

[Bran](#) poly MMF

[Changeling Press Releases](#) LGBTQ MM and MMM  
romance

[Paranormal B&B Box Set](#)

[Demon's Dream](#)

[Black Dagger MC](#)

[Rogue](#)

[Dodge](#)

[Buc](#)

[Camp](#)

[Confessions of a One-Percenter](#) interview style short  
story

**Series/Anthologies**

[\*Her Three Bears\*](#) poly MFMM (no crossing swords!)

Dream Come True—Gaining Ground Single Parents  
Rediscovering Love Anthology (limited publication ended)

[\*Fated Mates of Thorne Bay\*](#) *Multi-Author Series*

[\*Tobias\*](#)

*Merciless Few MC Multi-Author Series*

[\*Almost Heaven\*](#)

[\*Doc's Orders\*](#) (free short story) Caring MF DaddyDom

[\*Spider's Web\*](#)

# Social Media Links

## M.D. Stewart's Social Media

Author email

[mdstewartauthor@gmail.com](mailto:mdstewartauthor@gmail.com)

Link Tree

<https://linktr.ee/MDStewartAuthor>

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/MDStewartAuthor>

Facebook Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/mdstewartverse>

Book Bub

[www.bookbub.com/profile/m-d-stewart](http://www.bookbub.com/profile/m-d-stewart)

Goodreads

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18294133.M\\_D\\_Stewart](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18294133.M_D_Stewart)

Amazon Author Page

<https://www.amazon.com/~e/B07GBFKNDP>

Tik Tok

<https://www.tiktok.com/@mdstewartauthor>

## **Rosie Jarvis**

**(my MM romance pen name)**

Link Tree

<https://linktr.ee/AuthorRosieJarvis>