



TANK

*Unexpected
Child*

SAVAGE LEGION MC

ARIA RAY

Tank's Unexpected Child

Savage Legion MC, Book 2

Aria Ray

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Savage Legion MC

Book 2

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About the Book

My world was Savage Legion MC, no future fuss or family, till Ivy arrived, pregnant and seekin' a fake husband for protection. I dove in, but why can't I stop foolin' myself it's real?

I ain't pullin' punches here. I've led a charmed life in the Savage Legion MC. Raised by a wealthy family, I spent years jugglin' investments and savoring the club's perks. Proved my mettle to my brothers and had my way with every vixen in our club and then some.

Marriage and babies? Not even a blip on my radar until Ivy Monroe entered the picture. She's a looker, small and pretty, with a baby bump that could charm the devil himself. She ain't after a quick fling or old lady status; all she needs is protection from a psycho ex who won't quit.

Since I got a thing for pretty faces and a fiery hatred for stalkers, I signed up to be her hero in ten heartbeats flat. We sealed the deal with a big, phony wedding, but that's when things went off the rails.

Neither of us could keep it platonic. We flirted, held hands, locked lips like we were the world's happiest married duo. Heck, we even went a little further than that.

Then, reality hit me square in the jaw when danger came knocking at my door for Ivy and her unborn. It's a race now, beating 'em all down before one of those vultures slips through the cracks.

But the real twist comes when Ivy discovers the hidden motive behind our fake marriage. The road ahead ain't looking too

smooth, brother.

“**Savage Legion MC**” Series:

Rider’s Secret (Prequel)

Siege’s Twins (Book 1)

Tank’s Unexpected Child (Book 2)

Chapter 1

Ivy

I sit in a paper exam gown, twisting my hands in my lap as a stern-faced nurse asks question after question.

“The initial paperwork you completed shows that you are twenty-two years old. You had your tonsils out as a child and as an adult you were in several *accidents* that led to broken bones and one concussion, right?”

I cringe on the inside at her all too knowing expression. The way she said the word *accidents* tells me she suspects domestic violence. The part that sucks is she’s not wrong. “Yes, ma’am,” I respond quietly.

“You have no medical concerns other than a possible pregnancy, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. When was your last period?”

I panic at the realization of exactly how long it’s been. “About nine weeks ago.”

Her head snaps up and her expression turns slightly disapproving. “Don’t you keep track of your menstrual cycle? That’s very important from a women’s healthcare perspective.”

“I usually keep track, but lately my life has been...chaotic. I thought I missed my period because of stress.”

“And you stated that you’re not on any kind of birth control.”

I nod, knowing all too well that not being on birth control makes me seem irresponsible. “We use condoms religiously.”

“You realize that condoms are only about ninety-eight percent effective, right?”

“Yes. I talked to my family doctor, and he told me that although birth control pills were ninety-nine percent effective,

that only held true if there taken every single day as prescribed. I have anxiety and stomach problems, and the ones I tried made me nauseous. So, my boyfriend and I decided to rely on condoms.”

“I see,” she responds sourly before looking back at the computer screen. “It also says here that you’ve taken several over-the-counter pregnancy tests.”

“I’ve taken five over the last couple of days. All of them came back positive.”

“I see,” she mumbles as she makes a note in my chart. “The first step is for me to check your vitals. Then we’ll need a urine sample and someone will come and take a blood sample. After we get the results, the doctor will come in, perform a physical exam, and speak with you about a course of care.”

“I understand.”

She quickly wraps a blood pressure cuff around my arm and pumps it up until I think it’s going to squeeze my arm off. I get incremental relief as she slowly releases the pressure valve. I wait patiently as she takes my pulse and then aims a digital thermometer at my forehead.

I’m relieved the interaction with this stony-faced woman is nearly over. I’m feeling judged by her, but that might be my own anxieties coming into play. I just want to get the lab results and know for sure if I’m pregnant with my abuser’s child.

She reaches under the counter and pulls out a large, zippered bag with a urine sample cup visible through the clear plastic. “Use the wipe first, then urinate in the cup. When you’re finished, screw the lid on tightly, put it back in the bag and hand it in at the desk.”

I take the bag from her outstretched hand. “Thank you.”

I rush through the urine capture, praying that by some miracle the home pregnancy tests I’ve taken are all wrong. Since I’d selected different brands, all of the results being false positives didn’t seem likely.

After a phlebotomist comes in and takes my blood, I spend my time worrying about how I'm going to raise a child on my own when I can barely take care of myself. I pick up my phone, check my bank account balance, and then start scrolling through my e-mail. My heart wrenches when I see the acceptance message from the local community college. I'd tested so high on the entrance exam that I'd qualified for a scholarship for adults interested in furthering their education. Unfortunately, going to college will no longer be possible with all the things going on in my life.

My mind drifts to all the dreams of getting my college degree and becoming an architect. I'd been making sketches of buildings and floor plans since I was a teenager. I had a real knack for designing spaces, but in order to get paid for doing what I loved, I needed the knowledge that only came with a higher education. I imagine myself designing classy buildings accessible to people from all walks of life.

When the door swings open and an older, kind-faced doctor walks in, the reality of my situation slams back down on me. "Hello, Ms. Monroe. My name is Dr. Jenkins."

I shake his hand. "It's nice to meet you Dr. Jenkins. Thanks for seeing me today."

"No problem. Let's talk." He peers down at his electronic tablet. "The good news is that your pregnancy test came back positive."

I immediately tear up. Although I knew I was pregnant from taking the home pregnancy tests, it's now become an irrefutable fact.

Dr. Jenkins's expression immediately shifts to one of compassion. He holds a box of tissues out to me. "Should I surmise from your reaction that you were hoping for a negative test?"

I grab a handful of tissues and begin wiping my eyes. "I just don't know how I'm going to support a child when I'm struggling to support myself. My situation isn't one any child should be born into."

“What about the father? Is he still in the picture?”

“We aren’t together anymore. I have a protective order against him.”

Without missing a beat, Dr. Jenkins says, “If you would like a referral to a women’s health clinic, I can arrange that for you immediately. You are well under the time limit to terminate a pregnancy according to the laws in the state of California.”

I’m already shaking my head before he even gets the words out. “No. I was surrendered at birth and adopted by an older couple. If my birth mother cared enough to carry me to term, that’s the least I can do for my own child.”

The doctor’s mouth falls open in shock for a brief second. Before he can formulate a response, I do my best to explain.

“I’ve always wanted to be a mother. It’s just that I learned early on about all the reasons women give up their children and recognize that I fall into that category right now. I don’t believe terminating a pregnancy is the right move for me. I’d have a hard time living with that decision.”

“I understand,” he responds. “Terminating is not the right answer for everyone. Why don’t I get started with the physical exam and then we can talk about other options?”

As he performs his exam, I try to think of what other options would look like. The only practical solution would be giving my baby up for adoption. In order for that to happen, Doug would have to sign away his parental rights. I couldn’t see him doing that, and I refuse to allow him to end up with custody of our child. It would mean subjecting them to a lifetime of the same kind of abuse I’ve suffered at his hands.

When the exam is finished and I’ve answered a bunch more questions, Dr. Jenkins leaves the room so I can get dressed. A different nurse comes to escort me to his office. He is busy scribbling down something on a prescription pad when I enter the room and ease down into the empty seat in front of his desk.

“I’m writing you a script for prenatal vitamins. Whatever you decide to do, it’s important for you to maintain your own

health and the health of your unborn child.”

“I’m thinking that putting my child up for adoption may be in their best interest. I want to make sure whoever ends up with him or her is a kind, decent human being.”

Empathy radiates from his expression. “I understand completely. When it comes to newborns, adoptive parents are relatively easy to find.”

I wait patiently while he rummages through his desk drawer and pulls out a business card. “This is for the unit at social services that handles adoptions. I advise that you go through the state rather than a private adoption agency. The Department of Human Services has stringent requirements for prospective parents, and they will follow up periodically to ensure the child is safe and well adjusted.”

I couldn’t remember what kind of follow-up, if any, took place when I was adopted because I was placed as an infant. I believe this kindly doctor wouldn’t lead me astray, so I take the card from him.

“I’m going to think this over very carefully before I contact them. I want to make the right decision for my child and for myself.” After a brief pause, I ask, “How confidential is my medical information here? Could a nurse or clerical staff disclose that I’m pregnant if the child’s father were to call or stop by the office?”

“Absolutely not. There are laws that protect your medical information from being disclosed to third parties without your express written consent. If you end up going through with an adoption placement, you’ll need to fill out a release in order for us to share information about your pregnancy with social services.”

Relief surges through my chest. “Thank God. I can’t imagine a worse fate than my ex finding out about the pregnancy right now. I know he’ll have to be notified at some point. I’m just not ready yet.”

“Social services can help you with that as well. Just remember, that protective order you have protects you and

your child right up until you give birth.”

“Thanks for telling me that. I was really worried he might interfere with my pregnancy.”

“If he does, contact the police. You have that protective order in place for a good reason, I presume.”

We wrap up the consultation and I go out to the billing window. I knew ahead of time how much the office visit was going to cost, but the lab tests turn out to be three times what I anticipated. I sit in my car with the air conditioner on and read the doctor’s instructions and then scan over the card he gave me for social services. Suddenly, everything feels so real. I’m in way over my head. I know it all the way down to my bones.

I shove the paperwork into my purse, start my engine, and head for the nearest pharmacy. All I can think of is getting ahead of those prenatal vitamins. It’s the one tangible thing I can do to see that my baby gets off to a good start.

Chapter 2

Tank

Over the last couple of months I've turned into the angriest motherfucker on planet earth. I'm sitting at my favorite table in the pub our club manages, watching the bartender, Mel, top off my drink for the fourth time tonight. I'd locked up the tattoo parlor at eight and came straight here. I've been avoiding the clubhouse like the plague because all the vixens want to do is ride my cock. Normally, that's the answer to all my problems, but not this time. Right now, fucking is the furthest thing from my mind.

My grandfather passed away. He was ninety and had been ill for a long time. Watching him waste away from pancreatic cancer had been gut wrenching. Being released from his endless suffering meant his passing had been a fucking blessing. That didn't mean it was easy to let him go. I miss him like crazy. Now, there's a gaping hole in my life where he used to be.

I'm pretty confused when Cleo slides into the seat across from me because she's normally attached to our club president's hip. She is possibly the best old lady in our club and her entire world revolves around Siege and their four kids.

She gives me a half-hearted smile. "Good evening, Tank. I saw you sitting here and decided to say hello."

I shoot her a hard glare. "Liar. You made a beeline straight for me as soon as you walked through the door."

"Maybe you're just the first friendly face I saw," she responds stubbornly.

I jerk my chin toward the door. "Don't you have a husband and four unruly kids to worry about?"

She grins. "Siege is watching them this evening." Her hand smooths down her now flat tummy. "This is the first solo time he's had with the new twins."

“Really? How are Squeegee and Scum doing these days? Growing like weeds, I imagine.”

She frowns at me. “Their names are Sammy and Solomon.”

I shrug. “I don’t like those names. Sammy is a girl’s name and Solomon is way too fucking biblical.”

Her expression morphs from annoyed to indulgent. “So, you decided to take it upon yourself to rename them? Sorry, but that’s not how it works.”

“I gave them club names,” I assure her. “Trust me, they’ll thank me when they get old enough to prospect. We’ve got too many guys with plain names like Roy and Jimmy prospecting for us these days.”

Refusing to be distracted from whatever purpose she had in mind, Cleo sits down, “Can we get back to talking about you? I stopped by to see how you’re holding up.”

Now, it’s my turn to be annoyed. “Alright, who called our club president’s old lady to do a mental health check on my damn ass?”

She jerks back in her seat and makes the time out gesture with her hands. “Let’s start again. I need a favor. An important one that might end up being a matter of life or death. Are you up to the challenge? If you’re not up to it, I can find someone else.”

Now she’s ruffling my feathers. “Of course I’m up to being the stone-cold hero I’ve always been. Whose ass do I need to kick tonight?”

“A woman approached social services looking to put her unborn child up for adoption. Care to guess who called us almost immediately?”

Anger spikes hard and fast in my gut. “Don’t tell me it’s the same fuckers who tried to adopt Siege’s niece and nephew out from under him.”

She lowers her voice. “Yeah, it was Brent and Liza Henderson. And that’s not all.”

“On the contrary,” I interject. “That’s more than enough for me to give them a dirt nap.”

Cleo puts an abrupt end to that idea. “We’re not doing that because Brent’s brother is a very prominent advocate for abused children in our area. Provoking such a high-profile individual would be a mistake.”

“They’re all three members of the syndicate, so they’re eventually gonna get taken out.”

Cleo sounds annoyed. “Or we could try this new idea I’ve been working on where they end up arrested, tried, and convicted for their crimes.”

I sigh, none too happy with her train of thought on this issue. “My way is quick, easy, and permanent.”

“Let’s not argue about this in a public setting,” she shoots back. “Do you want to hear about the assignment or not?”

I pick up my whiskey and down it in one swallow, then turn my glass over on the table. It’s a visible signal for Mel not to refill my glass. “I’m all ears.”

“First of all, I want to say that you did a good job with your grandfather’s funeral. It was the perfect balance between solemn and a reflection of his down to earth, fun-loving personality.”

Bewildered, I respond, “Thanks, but that was months ago. Why are you bringing it up now?”

“You’re right, it’s been almost six months.” She starts to look uncomfortable and squirms in her seat for a few seconds. “Do you know Siege and I share everything with each other?”

I don’t like where this is going. “He doesn’t share club business with you. I know that for a fact. No brother does because it’s against the bylaws handed down by Siege’s old man when he started the club.”

“You’re correct about that,” she acknowledges. “Siege told me about your little problem.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, that’s not club business. It’s just my business. He shouldn’t have shared my personal affairs with

his old lady.”

She presses on. “Maybe not, but Siege mentioned your grandfather’s will gave you six months after he passed to find a wife. If you’re not married, you lose all your inheritance, which is not an insubstantial amount.”

“It ain’t that big a deal. Guess I’ll grab a club vixen and lock her down with a prenup. Like you said, I’ve got enough to make it worth her time.”

“Siege said you’re not interested in any of the club vixens because you think they’re all gold diggers. Plus, buying a bride, even a fake one, must be humiliating for you.”

I give her my best withering glare. “You would be the expert on fake marriages, since that’s how you ended up with Siege.”

A smile ghosts over her face, proving that my jibe hit its mark. “Touche. We got married so he would look like a family man when the judge reviewed his petition to adopt Tommy and Louisa. It so happens that we fell in love and the temporary arrangement turned into a permanent one.”

“If you have a point, go ahead and get to it, cos it seems like you’re talking yourself into a gigantic circle.”

“Think about it. You’re a rich man who needs an honest woman to wife up. The lady I mentioned earlier is an innocent woman, fresh out of an abusive relationship with no one to turn to. She’s dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, an asshole ex who won’t leave her alone, and now she’s got the Hendersons breathing down her neck to get custody of her child the moment she gives birth.”

My interest is honestly piqued. “Exactly how innocent is she?”

“She’s twenty-two years old and has been waiting tables to save up money for college for the last two years. She got a scholarship to study architecture, but now she’s working twelve-hour days just to keep a roof over her head. She’s really smart and believes in working to earn her own way in life. If it weren’t for the ex who is borderline stalking her and

being twelve weeks pregnant, she'd be enrolling in college soon."

I rub my chin as I think it over. This seems like a fairly easy assignment. "She just needs a place to stay and someone to scare off the boyfriend while you and your boss deal with the Hendersons, right?"

"Yes. This solution solves both your problems. Plus, she's already said that she'll sign anything you want. Ivy's worlds more trustworthy than any of the club vixens. She really needs someone to cut her a break, and who better than Savage Legion's vice president?"

"Look out for a college kid for a few months and collect a buttload of money? Seems like a deal that's too good to be true."

Cleo looks at me, her expression guarded. "It's safety for her and easy money for you."

As I think over her request, she puts the final nail in my coffin. "Ivy was surrendered as an infant by her mother. She was placed in a safe haven box at one of the local churches. She's got no one and she really needs a hero."

"Fucking hell, Cleo. You really know how to work me." Just imagining some poor woman all alone with the whole world against her pulls at my protective instincts. In the end, it's just too much to resist. "Alright, I'll meet with her and see if we can iron out a deal. I won't promise anything, but I'll try my hardest to help her."

"And yourself, Tank. Don't forget that by tying the knot with her, you're securing your grandfather's fortune."

"I don't care so much about getting my hands on his money. What I care about is keeping it out of the hands of the vultures circling his corpse. I cut off all contact with my entire extended family for a reason, and I can't stand the thought of those selfish bastards inheriting the money he worked so hard to earn."

"Well, I think he wanted you to settle down and knew exactly how to get you to do it."

I smother back a smile. “He’s probably in heaven right now watching me squirm about his rules for inheritance and laughing his ass off.”

“This is a textbook example of a win-win situation. I’m grateful you’re on board with giving her a fair shake.”

“Shaking is what will happen if she double-crosses me,” I say menacingly.

“Don’t be that way. You know you’re not gonna be hands on with a woman. You’re too much of a gentleman for that.”

I snort a laugh. “Shows how much you know about me. When do you want me to meet up with this charity case?”

“Ivy’s not a charity case,” Cleo snarls indignantly. “She’s a human being. You had better treat her like one unless you want me dropping down on you like Batman.”

“Sheesh, get off my case. I was just joking around. I get what you’re saying about this solving both our problems at once. My house is big enough that we might not see much of each other. And my security system is flawless. A hummingbird doesn’t flap its wings without my cameras picking it up.”

“I’m trusting you to do right by this young lady. I’ll bring her by the clubhouse around ten in the morning. Be sure you’re sober and looking reliable.”

“I’m always sober in the mornings and reliable even when I’m drunk. If this works out, she’ll be safe in my keeping.”

Chapter 3

Ivy

Calling social services turns out to be the best decision of my life. I end up meeting with a woman who works for child protective services. Cleo is nothing like I imagined a CPS worker would be. What catches me by surprise is how passionate she is about protecting children, even unborn babies. After listening to the details of my situation, she offers me a very out of the box solution, one I never dreamed of hearing from a social worker.

She has a friend willing to marry me on paper for the sake of my unborn child. He's a generous man known for doing good deeds and someone she trusts without reservation. She insists that he's popular with the women and not interested in a young pregnant lady. It sounds crazy, and I'm sure it's breaking all sorts of regulations, but if it buys me time and keeps me away from Doug then it's worth a try, as even with the protective order the police aren't doing anything.

Moreover, he's got a big house. I can have my own space and come and go as I please. He even has electronic security, so I don't have to worry about Doug showing up. I can't remember the last time I had a restful night's sleep where I didn't worry about him kicking my door in. Truth be told, it seems like almost too good of a deal to be true.

Living with a complete stranger is risky, but I don't feel as though I have a choice. Doug caught me coming out of work last night and tried to force me into his truck. I fought back and have marks on my face to prove it—and yet another report filed with the police. Thankfully, I was wearing a coat, so he didn't see the small baby bump I've been actively concealing. This can't go on. What if he had punched me in the stomach? He's done that before and I wouldn't put it past him to do it again.

I show up at the address Cleo gave me and find her standing beside her car waiting for me. I begin to get a bad feeling

when I see we're at a motorcycle club. It's a nice brick building with smoked windows and the parking lot has freshly painted lines designating each parking space. There are two huge planters, one on either side of the front door. It looks kind of like a classy pub, but the sign says Savage Legion MC.

Even though warning bells are going off in my head, I climb out of the car to check it out. My lip stings when I smile at the woman trying her hardest to help me turn my life around. It's a brutal reminder that I need to make this work if at all possible.

Cleo's expression darkens with concern when she sees my face. Embarrassment swamps me because I thought I'd been clever enough with my makeup for my injuries to skate by unnoticed.

She steps out to greet me. "Are you okay, Ivy? What happened to your face?"

"I worked a closing shift last night. When I got off, it was almost one in the morning and Doug was waiting for me outside. He wanted me to come with him. I didn't. What you see is the result of our struggle."

A deep masculine voice swears harshly. "Well, fuck that asshole."

I whip my head around to see the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on leaning against the doorframe. He's not just handsome, he's male model gorgeous. Someone who is so far out of my league that capturing his notice would be a pipe dream. It would be great if this foul-mouthed hottie was the one willing to take me in, because there is no way on God's green earth he'd be interested in pressuring me for attention or anything else.

Instead of being upset, Cleo shoots him a knowing look. "I wholeheartedly agree with that assessment. I can't believe he went after you again, even though you have a protective order in place." She gestures for me to follow her.

And I do because this woman is older, educated, and worldly. If she says it's okay to meet with someone here, then I'm willing to take her word for it. A little voice in the back of

my mind is telling me that the chances of whoever this is being worse than Doug are slim.

The muscle-bound hottie holds the door open for us like a proper gentleman. I murmur a thank you as I pass. He smells like the most expensive cologne I've ever smelled. There is also a faint whiff of leather, probably from the vest he's wearing. This man's good looks and heavenly smell are messing with my head.

When the three of us settle down at a four-top table, I realize this is the man I came to see.

Cleo introduces us. "Ivy, I'd like to introduce Rostein Jamison III. His nickname is Tank."

"It's a club name, not a nickname," he corrects her.

From her expression, I get the feeling she's teasing him. "My bad. His club name is Tank."

I speak before I think it through. "Because you're big and tankish, right?"

His expression shifts to one of amusement. "No, but that's a good guess. I was an armored tank driver in the Army. When I got out, the name stuck."

That seems to contradict his insistence the Tank is not a nickname, but I ignore that issue. Instead, I hold out my hand for him to shake. "My name is Ivy Monroe. My parents adopted me when I was a baby and named me after the ivy pattern on the blanket I was wrapped in when they found me."

A shadow crosses his face so fast I think I may have imagined it. Then he's shaking my hand. "That's pretty cool. Did they save the blanket for you?"

I nod, all smiles. "They sure did. My adoptive mom was extremely sentimental. I still have it tucked away somewhere."

Tank asks casually, "What happened to your adoptive parents?"

"My father passed when I was thirteen in a car crash, and my mother died when I was a senior in high school. They were both older. I think these days they probably wouldn't have

been allowed to adopt a baby, but things were different back then.”

“So, it’s just you? No extended relatives?”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t really have anyone but a few casual friends and an ex who likes to think he owns me. I hate to find out what he’s gonna do when he finds out I’m pregnant with his child.”

Cleo speaks up at that. “California law doesn’t currently recognize father’s rights when it comes to unborn children. All rights technically rest with the mother. He has no say over your newborn until he files for paternity and a judge vests him with parental rights.”

“That all sounds good, but nothing seems to get through to him. He just pops up whenever it suits him and tries to pull me into his truck.”

Tank asks, “When did you break up?”

“It’s been almost three months. I realized a few weeks later that I might be pregnant. Doug isn’t a nice person. I wouldn’t trust him around a baby.”

“How did you hook up with him in the first place? Why did you stay with him after you found out what he was like?”

Tank’s question sets Cleo off. “Don’t blame Ivy for being a victim. Abusers can be extremely manipulative.”

I interject quickly, hoping to deescalate the situation. “No. It’s a fair question. We were high school sweethearts. When my mother died, I was pretty vulnerable. He was there for me when I didn’t have anyone and was grieving. Later, when he started getting abusive, I honestly thought it was all me. He used to tell me that my name fit my personality because I was clingy and stubborn like an ivy vine. He even nicknamed me Poison Ivy because he said I poisoned our relationship by pestering him with questions and not trusting him. I was young and fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. I tried to end things with him multiple times over the last five years. He just keeps showing up and pulling me back in, whether I want him or not.”

“Cleo was right,” Tank grumbles. “Your ex sounds like a manipulative asshole.”

Something loosens in my chest at hearing the anger and indignation in his voice. “Almost everyone I talk to about Doug tells me he’s right. That I should trust him more and stop starting fights with him. They say if I were nicer, he wouldn’t get angry with me.”

Cleo asks, “What do you think, Ivy?”

I look her in the eye and tell the truth. “I think it’s wrong of him to treat me like a possession, hit me, and lie to me constantly. That’s not how decent people treat one another. That’s not how my adoptive parents treated each other or taught me to act.”

“If you could have one fantasy come true, anything you can imagine, what would it be?” Cleo’s question takes me by surprise because it seems like something a therapist would ask instead of a social worker.

I think it over for a few seconds before saying, “I sometimes wish I could get lost at sea and wash up on the shore of a beautiful, deserted island where I could build a little hut and scavenge for coconuts and pineapples for us to eat. It would just be me and my little one and we’d be safe.”

“That’s not realistic. You’d never be able to survive on your own like that,” Tank responds in a serious tone.

I’m quick to agree. “I know. Cleo asked about my fantasy, not what I thought was realistic. If I’m being realistic, I’d wish for a family that could foster my little one for a bit while I got a college degree so I could get a good job and provide for us. Of course, it wouldn’t be fair to my child to let them get attached to people and then take them away. That’s why I’m trying to find the right couple to adopt.” By the time I get to the last sentence, my voice is small and shaky.

“It sounds like the reoccurring theme is you’d rather keep your child but that doesn’t seem possible to you right now,” Cleo surmises.

I fight back the tears I promised myself I wouldn't shed today. "I can't imagine anyone who would give up their baby if they didn't have to."

Tank rubs the bridge of his nose, looking about as emotional as I feel. Finally, the big biker looks up and speaks. "I'm in. If you want me to marry you on paper and become your protector, I'll do it."

I glance at Cleo, confused by him talking about becoming my protector. "I don't understand. I thought you were considering a temporary marriage on paper to force my ex to stop thinking of me as available and so I would have a safe place to stay. Nobody said anything about you becoming my protector."

Tank reaches out and touches my temple. I grimace at the sting of pain that touching the bruise ignites. "I won't tolerate any woman in my orbit being abused. If you move into my house, you better believe I'm not going to allow some nutjob to continue knocking you around."

Doubt rises in my mind. "Are you sure about this? Doug is a pretty nasty guy. He carries a switchblade in his boot and served time for knifing a guy in a bar fight."

Tank snorts a laugh. "No matter how bad you think he is, I can beat his ass with one hand tied behind my back."

Cleo's disapproving voice rings out. "I'm sure Ivy doesn't want to watch you beat up the father of her child, Tank. We discussed this, remember?"

Tank slouches back in his seat, trying to look casual. "You said I couldn't give him a dirt nap. You didn't say anything about doling out a well-deserved ass kicking."

I rush to add my own two cents. "Kick away. I'd love to see my ex get some of what he's been dishing out to everyone else. I'm not harboring any romantic ideas about that man. I literally have zero feelings for him at this point and haven't in a very long time."

Cleo states firmly, "No violence." Then she looks at me and explains, "Naturally, there will need to be a prenup signed

prior to the two of you getting married.”

“Like I said before, I’ll sign whatever you want. If I were doing someone a favor this huge, I’d want some assurances they weren’t going to try to take advantage of me too.”

Tank runs his hands down the front of his jeans, his handsome face looking all kinds of serious. “I can have the prenup ready in a couple of weeks. We can get Rigs to perform the ceremony and register the marriage certificate once the prenup is signed. Since we can’t rely on your ex to keep his fists off your face, you’re coming home with me today.”

I know letting him boss me around is a bad idea, but I’ve never had someone take charge in a way that benefited me before. It feels more protective than possessive. This man is almost twenty years older than me. He might think of me like a daughter. Although this isn’t how I want to be seen, it’s worlds better than leaving this biker pub and getting jumped by Doug again.

Cleo isn’t about to let him leave with me before verifying that I am okay with it. “What do you say, Ivy? Do you want me to take you to Tank’s home and help you get settled in?”

“I do.” Turing to Tank, I say, “Thank you for agreeing to help me. I know this has been a huge ask on Cleo’s part. I promise to make myself as unobtrusive as possible.”

He stands and looks intently down at me. “Don’t ever think you have to make yourself small for me or any damn body else. I don’t have a fragile ego that needs a woman to tiptoe around worrying about what I think of everything she says and does. Just be yourself and speak up if something isn’t working for you.”

Swallowing thickly, I reply, “Alright. I can do that. Thanks again for helping me.”

He stares at me for so long I begin to think I might have said something wrong. His beautiful brown eyes have me transfixed. Finally, he says, “I want you to know that I’m also doing this for my own reasons that have nothing to do with you.”

I nod, unsure what to make of that comment. I would be hard pressed to imagine anything he is getting out of this situation but a bunch of trouble.

Cleo and I walk out to our vehicles, and I follow her to his place. All the while, I can't quite believe my luck.

Chapter 4

Tank

Hearing even the small part of Ivy's life story that she chose to share rips at my heart. She's been through so much in the last five years with this asshole, only to end up carrying his baby. That is a blessing her abuser does not deserve.

I don't give a flying fuck what Cleo has to say. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when I'm going to ring his bell in the most physical way possible. I can't imagine any man despicable enough to punch a woman in the face. I can tell that's what he's done because the poor woman actually has knuckle marks on the side of her cheek. Seeing how she tried to cover it up with makeup infuriates me. There are few things in the world I hate more than men who abuse women and children.

We pull up to my home, Ivy seems fascinated by it. At first, I wonder if it's because she realizes how rich I am, but then I remember what Cleo said about her. I gotta admit, my Spanish Colonial Revival mansion is pretty damn spectacular, and for anyone interested in architecture it's probably a treat to see. I'll give her the grand tour later on but for now I show them inside. Cleo has been to my home before, so I let her show Ivy around while I make coffee. Before they wander off, I invite Ivy to choose which of the unoccupied bedrooms she likes the best. I pace in my kitchen waiting for them to come back downstairs.

Fifteen minutes later we're drinking coffee and making small talk. Cleo is going the extra mile to ensure Ivy feels comfortable. I'm busy shutting my mouth for fear of saying the wrong thing. I don't want to be the reason she ends up back in a precarious situation.

I must admit that the more time I spend with Ivy, the more I like her. She's young, sweet, and easy to talk to. Every now and then I capture a glimpse of the intelligence she's learned to hide so well.

Just watching and listening to Ivy teaches me more than I want to know about the mental makeup of her abusive ex-boyfriend. He's clearly a man who enjoys lording control over a pretty woman. I imagine he's put off by any behavior that seems assertive and belittles her in order to make her feel stupid and insignificant. I've seen his type before, small, arrogant, and insecure. It's a shame she's wasted so much time on someone so unworthy.

At some point she takes off her button-up sweater and I can see the gentle swell of her stomach. It takes me a moment to realize what I'm seeing is her baby bump. My emotions are thrown for a loop as my protective instincts double and then triple in an instant.

Knowing that this vulnerable woman has a new life growing in her body makes me want to hold her, guard her, and make her mine. It's strange, because I've never felt those things before. It doesn't make sense to have such a visceral reaction to seeing her baby bump.

Sitting there watching her talk with Cleo, I realize for the first time that she is more than pretty. Ivy is beautiful in the way I like best. She's got that hourglass thing going on and her waist narrows slightly before her hips flare out enough to capture the notice of any man with a heartbeat. She has long blonde hair and clear blue eyes. Her sun-kissed skin looks soft. The sound of her voice is delightful, as if it had been designed by a god with an ear for music. She talks with her hands, all feminine grace.

Holy fuck. My cock is getting hard just watching her. Jumping to my feet, I turn before excusing myself. Then I rush to the bathroom on the main level and lock the door behind me. I want to stroke myself in the worst way but refuse to do something that asinine. My stomach churns that a young woman could come to me for help, and I would shame myself by wanting to make her mine.

I was raised better than this. If my grandfather is actually watching from above, he'd be disappointed in me, maybe even as disappointed as I am in myself. I pace and think of horrible war-related shit until my cock goes limp again.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I head back to the living room, vowing to myself that I'll keep my thoughts pure and hold her at arm's length. She's here for my help, not to be exploited by a dirty old man almost twenty years her senior. By the time I make it back to the living room, Cleo and Ivy are talking about going to her apartment to retrieve her things.

"I can get a couple of prospects to help me pack your things and bring them here," I offer. "We can put the boxes in the garage so you can get to what you need."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that," Ivy says. "I'm sure you have better things to do than pack and move my stuff."

"Nah, I've been looking for a good workout. Plus, you have to know that moving is a high-risk time for people with abusive exes. Even though you aren't moving out of his place, to your ex, it will feel like he's losing control of you."

"Yeah, I get that," Ivy replies. "I don't actually have much to pack. The apartment is an efficiency and it came furnished. Plus, I have a protective order on him so he shouldn't come near the place."

"How's that working out for you?" I ask, looking pointedly at her bruised cheek. When I see her eyes glisten like she's about to start crying I feel like shit. "Sorry, I didn't mean it to come out in that way."

"It's okay," she says quietly.

"If you give me your number, I'll call and you can let me know what to leave and what to take. After what went on with your ex last night, it would be better if you hang around the house and relax a little."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Cleo says.

Ivy's reluctant expression speaks volumes about how much she dislikes the idea of being grounded, but she agrees anyway. "Alright. I have to admit that I'm a little exhausted. I tossed and turned all night worrying about what would happen at our meetup."

I can't help but give her assurances. "I promise everything is going to be okay moving forward. You have nothing to

worry about.”

We exchange phone numbers and she gives me her address and keys.

“Thanks again, Tank. I know I keep saying that, but I really appreciate it.”

“It’s my pleasure. Just relax and keep your phone turned on.”

With that, I rush out of the house like hell hounds are nipping at my feet. I need some time to myself to sort out my feelings. Driving my SUV to her place gives me a chance to get my head screwed on straight.

I ask a couple of prospects to meet me there and the moment we walk in, my heart melts all over again. Her shabby little apartment is filled with pink, blue, and mint green curtains, toss cushions, and scatter rugs. She has a bunch of healthy-looking houseplants and stacks of sketch pads filled with drawings of buildings. My hand skates over one design so magnificent that it blows my mind. Whoever thought such a young person with no college education could render such intricate drawings?

“You okay, boss?” Ricky’s voice startles me from my internal thoughts.

“Yeah, of course I am. Start with the plants,” I respond gruffly. “Box them up carefully and put them in the front passenger side of my SUV.”

Looking around, I began gathering up the sketch pads. That’s when I spy a wooden trunk that looks like it might be a good way to transport some of her stuff. When I pull the lid open, what I see takes my breath away. Tucked neatly inside is a small baby blanket with a neat little ivy vine hand embroidered along the edges. Before I can think to stop myself, my hand drops down to touch the soft cloth.

I try to imagine Ivy as a small baby wrapped in this blanket by a loving mother before she was taken to a safe haven. I lift the blanket out and rub it against my face. Something blooms in my chest. I don’t know exactly what it is, but it feels like

sunshine and flowers mixed with the high I get from drinking too much coffee. A small voice in the back of my head whispers that it's the beginning phase of falling in love with someone.

I'm a rough, hard-hitting biker acting like a teen girl with a high school crush. This isn't me at all and I need to stop. I carefully tuck the blanket away, deciding not to put anything else in her little memory chest. As I close the lid, I try my best to close myself to this kind of heartache. Ivy is a young lady in need, nothing more.

I hear a commotion outside near my vehicle and run out to see what's going on. The first thing I see is some guy wearing jeans and a denim jacket with the arms cut out arguing with one of the prospects.

"That's my lamp. Put it back where you got it. I didn't give you permission to go into my girlfriend's apartment."

I can't get to the asshole fast enough. I've got my hand around his throat and have him pinned against my SUV before he even knows I'm there. "I'm guessing you're Doug the dipshit."

His eyes are practically bulging out of his head. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Ivy's fiancé. Clearly, you're not her boyfriend, because she traded up."

"Bullshit. Ivy and I have been together for years and I've never seen you before."

"That's strange. She's told me all about you." Reaching behind him, I jerk his wallet out of his back pocket and open it up. "Do not fucking move, asshole." I pull out his driver's license and read off his full name and address before stuffing it in my vest pocket.

"I'm not going to stand on the street and argue a bunch of stupid shit with you. I'm also not going to tolerate you stalking Ivy. Moving forward, I had better never hear you refer to her as your girlfriend or find that you've contacted her by phone or in person. If I do, you can look forward to having your

spleen ripped out through your lying mouth. Am I making myself clear?”

“I’m not scared of you, dude.” I can tell by the tone of his voice that he’s dead serious.

“Well, you should be. Not many men in this town are quite ignorant enough to cross a member of the Savage Legion. You must not be too bright.” “I backhand him across the face. “See what a nice man I am. I could have punched you like you did to her last night. If she wanted you, she wouldn’t have fought so hard to escape your grasp. If she wanted you, you wouldn’t have had to try and force her into your damn truck.”

“I want to hear that from Ivy. We have an understanding.”

“You might have had an understanding with Ivy in the past. Now, you and I are making a new one.”

“Fuck off biker boy, the slut’s mi—”

I don’t give him a chance to finish as my fist pounds him in the gut pushing the air out of his pathetic mouth. A few more well aimed punches land on his face sending him flying. While he’s rolling around on the ground, I kick him in the ribs for good measure.

“Ivy gave me permission to beat your sorry ass if you were a problem. Are you finished being a problem or do I need to keep wailing on you?”

“I’m done for now,” he says breathlessly.

“Wrong answer, asshole. I want you to tell me that you understand Ivy is no longer your concern and back the fuck off.”

“Fuck off. Ivy has always been and will always be mine.”

The fucker clearly only understands one language. I jerk him up off the ground, throw him against my SUV, and step back to give him room to defend himself. What happens next isn’t much of a fight. It all comes down to training and experience. I have it. He doesn’t because he’s spent most of his life beating women.

Needless to say, I leave him a bloody mess on the ground while the prospects look on with wide eyes. When I'm finished, I pull out my cell phone, take a picture of him, and send it to Siege.

During the drive back to my place, I turn the situation over in my mind, trying to figure out if Ivy had been serious about not caring if I had a run-in with her ex. My gut tells me she is long past being his punching bag and truly won't mind that I gave him a taste of his own medicine.

I am so drawn to this woman, and that's a distraction I don't need right now—and neither does she, what with her abusive ex and unborn child. The last thing in the world I want is for her to feel like she has to pay for my support and protection by showing me attention or affection.

Normally, I would invite the prospects in for a few beers, but this time I send them away, intent on unloading the SUV myself. Some small part of my brain knows it's because I don't want them around Ivy and her unborn child. They aren't fully patched brothers yet, so I can't trust them around the two most precious things in my life. That seems off when I think it through. I normally trust our prospects with any task, as do the other brothers. I quickly realize my illogical thinking must be because my blood is still up from the fight with Ivy's ex.

Instead of getting out and unloading her belongings, I sit in my SUV still fuming about the fight. He's one dangerously stupid motherfucker. Ivy says he just keeps turning up like a bad penny. I don't expect the hardheaded idiot to stop just because I beat the shit out of him. He's too stubborn for that.

I pick up my phone and dial my attorney, Smoke. "Hey, this is Tank. Do you have my prenup ready yet?"

My club brother sighs. "I told you it would take up to two weeks and you said there was no rush."

"I changed my mind," I respond hotly.

"It's barely noon, Tank."

"Yeah, I know what time it is." I hold back from calling him an annoying ingrate because he's a club brother and my friend.

“You only requested it last night. I do have other clients, you know.”

“I know you’re a busy lawyer. Can you get my prenup ready or do I need to go somewhere else? I hear Charles Canterbury will do just about anything to keep his clients fucking satisfied.”

“Charles fucking Canterbury? Are you serious?” Suddenly, he stops talking and a short silence spins out between us. Then he asks quietly, “What’s going on, Tank? You sound riled up today.”

“My fiancée’s ex is being an asshole and isn’t taking notice of the protective order. I just beat the shit outta him and it was harder than I thought it would be to stop myself from beating the stupid fucker to death.”

That sick admission gets Smoke moving in the right direction. “I’ll wrap it up and get it to you as soon as possible. If the police try to pick you up on a battery charge, call my cell phone. I’ll make sure I keep it with me all day.”

“Thanks, Smoke. Sorry for fucking up your day.”

“No problem, brother. Stay safe out there.”

I end the call and hit Rigs’ number from my contact list.

“Hey, Tank. What’s up?”

“Did Cleo mention that I want to get hitched?”

“You know she did. That woman doesn’t leave anything to chance.”

“Great. It’s happening now. Get your ass over here, brother.”

Unlike Smoke, Rigs doesn’t much care what the issue is. He’s the type of friend who just rolls with the punches. “I’m on my way. Should I grab a witness or do you have someone already?”

“Bring whoever you can dig up. I want this over with as soon as possible.”

“How romantic,” he quips sarcastically.

“Don’t get salty with me. We’ve known each other too long, preacher man.”

Rigs, Dutch, and I founded this club along with Siege’s old man. We’d all served together in the military, though Siege’s father was more than twenty years our senior. Although we were barely old enough to ride, the three of us stuck through thick and thin together.

“You used to have a sense of humor. Don’t know where it went, but you need to find it before you turn into a crabby old man nobody wants to be around.”

“I ain’t that fucking old. Are you comin’ or not?”

“You know that I am, brother. I’ll be there later this evening and I’ll pass the word about your wedding.”

My club brothers would be put out if I got married and didn’t invite them, so it is kind of Rigs to take care of that. “Thanks,” I respond warmly. “I appreciate it even though I don’t fucking act like it sometimes.”

Chapter 5

Ivy

I don't end up getting any calls from Tank about what to move and what to leave. Instead, I get a video call from a bloody-faced Doug screaming about some biker who claims to be my fiancé. Tank really did a number on his face. I zone out for a second as I look at him. Then his arrogant voice pulls me back into the moment.

“Is this fucker for real? Have you been cheating on me, Ivy? If you have, there will be hell to pay. I promise you that much.”

Something about being safe and sound at Tank's house makes me bold. “We haven't been together for almost three months. Therefore, finding a new boyfriend isn't cheating. Tank is ex-military and going by the look of your face, he's a pretty good fighter. I wouldn't tangle with him again if I were you.”

“He tried to force me to give up my claim on you, but I wouldn't do it because I love you. You know I do.”

“I know you beat me up regularly. That's not love, Doug. I know you're too messed up to see that, but it's true.”

His voice turns cold. “You don't get to walk out on me, Ivy. I'm not some punk who lets his woman walk all over him. You should know that by now. If you don't want to respect me, too bad. I'll do what I have to get you to act right.”

“If you approach me again, I'm gonna call the cops on you.”

“Fuck your court order. In case you haven't noticed, I don't give a shit what the judge says. I'll do as I like with my own girlfriend.”

“Alright, but now that I'm getting married, I'm going to have to stop communicating with you. This is your heads-up that I'm blocking you on everything. If you approach me in public, I can't be responsible for what my fiancé does to you.”

“Don’t you dare fucking block me, bitch.”

I’d had to play nice and protect his feelings as best I could before, because I was scared of what he might do, but now that I’m somewhere safe, I can finally block him. So that’s exactly what I do. I cut him off in the middle of screaming at me and proceed to block him everywhere. With each new block I put into place, my anxiety clicks down a notch.

When it’s all done, I go to my happy place and read over my college acceptance letter one more time. Then I pull up the scholarship notification. It feels empowering to know that I scored so high on the entrance exam and that my college fees are paid for. If only I was in a position to attend, then everything in my life would be amazing.

I close my phone and take the opportunity of Tank being gone to explore his home more thoroughly. I’d never been inside one of these Spanish Colonial Revival houses before, it looks like it was built in the late nineteen twenties. The outside is white stucco with a red tiled roof and the back forms a courtyard with trees providing shade and a large triple garage to one side connects to the main house. This is clearly a later addition, but it fits in perfectly—and whoever designed it had been very talented. Inside Tank had kept the house close to authentic, with exposed beams and tiled flooring throughout. It looks like his home was professionally decorated because everything is color coordinated and even the textures are artfully mixed. He really has a lovely home. I can’t imagine living in such a fine place day in and day out. It’s pure luxury. It’s really not where I would expect a biker to live, but as I am starting to learn there are many hidden sides to my new protector.

I’m drawn to the artwork covering his walls. Each piece has an artist’s name at the bottom, not that I recognize them at all. Fingering through the books on his bookshelf is fun as well. He has a lot of books on the stock market and day trading. I guess that must be how he makes his money.

I was exploring his ginormous refrigerator when the garage door opens and then closes. A few minutes later, Tank comes stomping into the house with bloody knuckles. The realization that my ex's blood is staining his fists does something to me. It makes me feel safe.

He realizes I'm looking at his hands and heads for the sink. "Sorry, your ex showed up and caught a beat down from me."

"Yeah, I know. He called me, screaming his head off about it."

He freezes in place and I quickly explain.

"For the first time I have the luxury of not giving a damn what he thinks, so I warned him to stay away from us and blocked him on everything."

He starts moving again, turns on the water, and runs it over his knuckles.

I step forward, grab some paper towels, and begin to gently wash the blood away. "I'm sorry you had to deal with him today. He can be a real ass that when he wants to be."

"He kept insisting you were his." Tank's voice is rough and disgruntled.

"I'm not his," I clarify.

Tank closes one of his hands around mine. "I know you're not, but I don't think he's going to give up until you're officially married, and maybe not even then."

I begin to feel emotional. "This has been my life for five long years. What difference is another two or three weeks going to make? I wish I knew how to make him stop. I really do."

Tank turns me around to face him with his hands on my upper arms. "Look at me, Ivy. Your ex is just a garden variety asshole. He's stubborn and annoying, but not invincible. You just leave that fucker to me."

I look into his eyes, surprised by the conviction I find staring back at me. "Why are you doing all this for me? I'm a stranger. You don't even know me."

His gaze softens. “Didn’t Cleo tell you that I’m nursing a gigantic hero complex? Turning down an opportunity to be a big-ass hero would pain me.”

I finally get it. “So, you do stuff like this for everyone, not just me?”

His eyes slide away. “Something like that. Let’s just say I like dedicating myself to a good cause.”

I’m not sure how I feel about being referred to as a cause. Since I’ve been called much worse, I decide being a good cause isn’t quite an insult. “Well, I appreciate it more than you know.”

“Great, because I want to move the marriage ceremony to today. My attorney is e-mailing the prenup and our club preacher is on his way. I feel like it’s safer for you to be married sooner, rather than later.”

Shock rolls through me. “A few weeks can’t make that much of a difference.”

“It might not, but I don’t want to take any chances. Will you do this for me?”

I nod, looking into his troubled face. Getting into a fight with Doug really rattled him. Any fool could see that.

“Sure, why not. Like you say, the sooner, the better.”

He uses some clean paper towels to dry his hands. “If you’ll come with me, I probably have that prenup in my e-mail. I want you to read it over and give you an opportunity to ask any questions you may have.”

I quietly follow him, feeling like something is off but unable to put my finger on what it is. The more I’m around Tank, the more relaxed I feel. This man clearly understands what he’s up against with Doug. If getting married now rather than later is important to him, then so be it.

I watch as he prints out the prenup and hands it to me to read. I start skimming over it and it says about what you would expect a document like this to say, that if and when we divorce, I will not get a percentage of his assets. It also says

neither of us will parade around in public showing affection toward other people. Again, this makes sense. No man likes to be publicly humiliated by a wife who appears to be cheating.

Other parts are written like a real prenup between two people who plan to spend the rest of their lives together. It talks about shared custody of any children we have together, inheritance rights for the firstborn and subsequent children. It even outlines a monthly stipend of what can only be construed as alimony based on the number of children we have.

Suddenly, it clicks. Tank did not come clean with his attorney about the nature of our relationship. He's operating under the assumption that our marriage is for real, rather than a temporary arrangement of convenience. It makes sense that he might not want to disclose embarrassing details to the same attorney that handles the rest of his legal needs.

Clearly, the parts about potential divorce, child custody, and alimony are superfluous to our situation, so I just put those parts out of my mind. "Everything looks fine to me. Where do I sign?"

Tank's gaze intensifies as he hands me a fancy-looking fountain pen that he pulls from the drawer of his desk. His voice breaks when he speaks. He has to clear his throat and start again. "Sign and date at the bottom of the last page."

I take the pen from him, feeling like this prenup might not hold up in a court of law because there are spaces for initials throughout the document that he's instructing me to ignore. Since I don't intend to ever challenge it, initialing all those spaces doesn't really matter. I flip to the back page and do as he says. I wonder again if I'm being naïve about the whole situation, but what have I got to lose?

I hand him the document back and ask, "Shouldn't we have it notarized? You know, to make it official?"

His eyes lift from the paper to me. "My attorney is one of my club brothers. He'll stop by so see us get married later tonight and sign off on the paperwork. In the state of California, there are two different types of notary services, an acknowledgement and an oath. He's going to ask for your ID

and compare the signature on this document with the signature there. He'll ask you if you signed of your own free will. If you state that you did, he'll sign in acknowledgement that the signature is authentic. The one where the notary has to be present is an oath. An oath requires you to swear that the contents of the document are true. That applies to witness reports and such. It doesn't really apply to a prenup."

"Gotcha. I never knew there was a difference."

He quickly scribbles his own signature and then slides the paper into his desk. Right before he locks the drawer, he pulls out something tiny and shoves it into the pocket inside his vest. We both stare at each other for a few seconds as if we can't figure out what to say next. It's definitely an awkward moment.

Finally, Tank clears his throat and speaks. "Like I said, our club preacher will be here in a couple of hours with a witness or two. I'm sure he'll want to take a picture of us to memorialize the occasion. I'm going to go clean up, and I suggest you do the same."

"Oh God, thanks for the heads-up. Do you mind if I look through my boxes for something to wear?"

"Not at all. You weren't joking when you said you didn't have a lot of stuff at your place. It fit in eight boxes. I also brought your little trunk of memorabilia. It's all in the back of my SUV. If you want, I'll bring them up to your room real quick."

When he stands, I jump up as well.

"I can help carry boxes."

"Or you can sit tight while I do it. Either way is fine, I suppose."

I follow him out of the room. "Helping hands make light work."

"I've heard that saying before," he responds as we enter his garage from the side door.

Tank pulls out my small trunk first and hands it to me before grabbing three boxes and stacking them on top of each other. When he picks them up, his bulging muscles make it seem like it's no effort at all. I rush ahead and open the door for him, balancing my trunk on one hip. We hot foot it upstairs and two trips later all my boxes are stacked neatly against the wall in my spacious new suite.

Tank turns to me. "Do you need help unpacking?"

I can't help but smile at how nice he is. I'm not used to men who are kind and considerate. "No, go freshen up before your friends get here. I'll be just fine."

"Alright," he says reluctantly as he heads for the door. My soon-to-be temporary husband stops in the doorway and glances over his shoulder. "Just so you know, there's no rush. Take your time. I'm going to throw some steaks on the grill so we can make an evening of it."

I'm taken aback that he's trying to make the day we tie the knot special, especially since this is supposed to be a fake marriage. Worry niggles in my gut that he hasn't told anyone about that part. "Do your friends know our marriage isn't real?"

He pivots around on his heel to look at me. There's something in his expression that I can't quite get a handle on. "No. I haven't told many people that part. For starters, the marriage is real in terms of being performed by an ordained minister and registered with the state. We'll end up with a marriage license to prove it. Secondly, it's none of anyone's business exactly the nature of our relationship. Thirdly, the more people who know, the easier it is for your ex-asshole to find out."

He seems to be getting more wound up as he ticks off reasons to pretend we're marrying for a happily ever after, so I hold up both hands in a placating gesture. "I just want to know how to act around your visitors—whether they knew or not."

His shoulders relax a bit. "I would go with the blushing bride I rushed to the altar before she could have second thoughts about marrying a rough biker, because that's the story

I'm going with." His self-confidence is reassuring. However, it's also a little worrisome that he's got a whole plan worked out in his head to explain our hasty marriage. I suddenly have that feeling of being in over my head again.

I take an involuntary step back as I nod my understanding. "I guess I haven't had a chance to think about the logistics of how this will work."

"I'm not surprised, since we haven't talked about the logistics yet." He jerks his chin for me to come to him and like a moth drawn to the flame, I do.

He reaches out to snag my left hand and his right-hand dives into the inside pocket of his vest. I remember him stashing something there earlier. He pulls out the biggest and flashiest diamond ring I've ever seen and slips it on my finger. It's a tad tight but not uncomfortable.

I can't stop staring at how much smaller my hand is than his and how the diamond glitters in the overhead lighting. I move my hand slightly, unable to take my eyes off the ring. I want to ask if it's real, but it hits me like a ton of bricks that everything about this man screams wealth and privilege, from his expensive cologne to his luxurious home to his brand-new four-wheel drive SUV. So, it's unlikely he would have a flashy fake diamond ring floating around in his desk drawer.

When my eyes lift to his and I open my mouth to object, he cuts me off. "The ring belonged to my grandmother. Take good care of it."

My eyes slide away because I'm becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this situation. "I don't know about entrusting me with such an important family heirloom. My ex always said I was irresponsible. What if he's right? I don't want to end up accidentally losing something so precious."

Tank gives my hand a little squeeze. "Your ex is a complete idiot. I ended up beating his ass before our first visit was over. He's a liar and a self-serving prick. Don't believe all the ignorant shit he told you, because it's clearly not true."

"But what if I misplace it or, God forbid, lose it entirely?"

He tugs me closer and gazes down into my eyes. “Me giving you this ring is a vote of confidence in your ability to be a responsible person. Either your ex is right about you or I am. If you were betting, where would you put your money, Ivy?”

“On you,” I say instinctively. “I’ll be extra careful with it. I promise.”

“I know that you will. I’m gonna go now and give you some time to yourself so you can think long and hard about if you want to say I do when my friends get here.”

My eyes fly up to his again. “Why wouldn’t I want to marry you? You’ve been nothing but nice to me.”

A dark shadow crosses his face, but he shuts down his expression so fast that I question exactly what it was I saw. “Some women don’t like pushy men.”

I gaze up at him. We’re still holding hands, and that makes me bold. “I don’t mind you being pushy as long as I can always say no to you.”

Surprise registers on his face. “You have the right to say no about anything to any person, including myself. I’ll personally have a little talk with anyone who doesn’t accept your no for an answer.”

“Alright, then, we’re all good.” When a faint smile curves up the edges of his mouth, I add, “Now, go get cleaned up and put some steaks on the grill. Your new fiancée is starving.”

That comment gets me a full-on smile from this handsome older man. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get right on it.”

Chapter 6

Tank

No sooner do I get washed up than Rigs shows up with a couple dozen or so of our club brothers. Only our club officers know that this marriage is not one straight from the heart. Siege, Dutch, Rider, Rigs, and myself are the only officers, and I can tell by the look on their faces they understand the gravity of my situation. The rest of my club brothers are laughing and whooping it up. Several brought gifts. One brought a bunch of roses.

Me? I'm feeling conflicted as hell. On the one hand, I want to do the right thing by taking in this innocent woman and offering my protection to her and her unborn child. But then on the other hand, I am feeling strangely possessive of her. I'm intelligent enough to know it's because she's pregnant. That makes her more vulnerable to my way of thinking. Seeing my club brothers so happy to see me married is messing with my mind, making me want the marriage to be real.

It's not real, I remind myself. This situation just mimics everything I thought I ever wanted if I were to get married. A stunningly beautiful woman. Check. Sweet as the day is long. Check. Respectful toward me. Check. At risk and in need of a strong protector to keep her and her unborn child safe. Double check. Willing to overlook my domineering side. Yep. She's even agreeable to marrying me, if only in form and not function, but to my stupid mind, it still counts.

The thing is it would be wrong to take advantage of her vulnerability. I'm a man with morals. So, I quell my rising need and force myself to be a gentleman. I wave to my club brothers and turn the meat on the grill as they approach.

Dutch walks straight up to me, looking concerned. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine. You know nothing gets me down."

His expression is dour. “I can’t believe Cleo tapped you for this assignment.”

I frown at my friend. “What are you talking about? I’m definitely the best choice for this assignment. In fact, I’ve already gotten a chance to put a beatdown on her asshole ex.”

“No, brother, you’re not the best choice. You have an active social life that’s going to have to be put on hold indefinitely. They should have come to me instead. I literally have nothing going on.”

I know what Dutch is referring to. I’m very active with the club vixens. I enjoy getting my dick wet, and now that folks think I’m married, it’s going to put the brakes on all my fun. Dutch knows me well and he’s not wrong about that. Dutch, on the other hand, I can’t remember the last time my friend got laid. It’s probably been years. In his case, there wasn’t a sacrifice to be made when it came to that stretch of celibacy.

I shrug off his concern. “It’s fine, brother. Since the old man passed, I haven’t had a lot of interest in getting laid anyway.”

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I’ll take over the babysitting assignment for you.”

I don’t know whether Dutch’s comment is a dig toward Ivy’s age or a reference about her unborn child. Since I’m not spoiling for a fight today, I decide to let it slide.

Thankfully, none of the wives showed up, probably because it was late notice and in the middle of the day. I don’t know why Cleo and Frannie being here would bother me, but somehow it does. Maybe I’m worried they would say something to make Ivy second guess her choice to allow me to be her protector.

As if thinking of her conjured her, Ivy walks out of the house looking more beautiful than before. She’s wearing a white summer dress with thin straps that cinches in at her waist before flowing back out into a full skirt. Her baby bump is on full display. She definitely has that glow of motherhood about her and it looks stunning on her. All I want to do is fall

to my knees and worship her pretty rounded belly. If that baby were mine, she would become my queen.

She's all alone. She needs you. Take her and make that baby yours. Fucking hell, my mind is a strange and convoluted thing. It's just my luck that it picks today of all days to develop a split personality.

She's showing a lot of skin. Although it looks like she has a tan, I suspect that's just her natural color. Her shoes are white sandals with clear gemstones studded on top. With my huge diamond glittering on the third finger of her left hand, her presentation is classy and feminine.

Standing there with my mouth hanging open, I can't stop staring at her to save my life. Neither can anyone else. The whole patio just got quiet, and it takes her by surprise. I can tell because she stops dead in her tracks and hesitates near the French doors.

Her eyes search around until she finds me. When I smile at her, she perks up and makes her way toward me.

Dutch curses under his breath. "You're fucked now, brother."

I don't respond to his perceptive statement, but I sure as hell agree. Ivy is every man's dream come true. Keeping my hands off her is going to be a constant battle. She's too young for me, I remind myself as she gets closer.

As if she's intent on proving my internal thoughts wrong, Ivy jumps onto her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. "You sure clean up nice, handsome."

I stare down at her blankly, trying to figure out why she did that. The awed whispers of my club brothers remind me that most of them think our marriage is for real. A little voice in the back of my mind whispers, *She's just acting like they expect her to act.*

Fuck, with that realization, my situation just gets ten times harder. I clear my throat, drape one arm around her waist, and pull her closer. "You look like a princess."

She chuckles. “I was going for bride, but I’ll definitely settle for having a royal bearing on our special day.”

I lean down and kiss her on the forehead. That’s when I realize I’m going to have to kiss her on the lips at the end of the ceremony. My whole body tenses because I know damn well and good that I’m going to pop a boner if I have to kiss her. I can’t think of anything more embarrassing than not being able to control my body in front of the brotherhood.

Ivy drapes her arms around my waist and whispers. “Calm down. Whatever happens, we’ll handle it.”

The concerned look on her face makes me think she’s worrying that Rigs might not agree to perform the wedding ceremony after all or something like that.

I try my best to reassure her. “It’s just nerves. Not many things in life rattle me, but you do.”

She flashes me a quick smile. “I’ll try not to do that. Are we eating or saying vows first?”

I put down my grilling tongs. “Vows first. Then I get to feed my new wife the best steak money can buy and expensive wine straight from my private stock.”

Her face lights up. “Well, I can’t drink alcohol because it’s not good for the baby, but if you throw in some chocolate, I’ll be your friend for life.”

I slowly relax into the moment with her. “I think that can be arranged.”

Suddenly, a huge crowd is making their way outside. It’s the fucking wives. Cleo’s got Fran and her friend Mattie with her. Great. There’s no telling how this day is going to end now.

They’ve got no kids, though. Worry niggles at the back of my mind. Most everyone I know is here, so who’s watching their kids? I look around for Siege and Rider. They’re all smiles, so I guess they’ve hired a babysitter. I sure the fuck hope they vetted them properly. I realize rather quickly that I’m now creating things to worry about for some God forsaken reason.

Rigs is setting up some kind of podium and the women are carrying cake boxes from a local bakery. I watch as they stack a smaller cake onto a larger one. They scatter a few roses on the top and step back to admire their work.

A lump forms in my throat that these women have gone out of their way to make Ivy's pretend wedding special. Then again, there is a good chance that Cleo is the only one who knows the real deal. Why I'm tormenting myself about who knows is beyond my ability to reason.

Dutch picks up the tongs and begins tending to the food, presumably so we can say our vows in peace. I keep reminding myself that this isn't a real wedding, because it feels so much like it is.

Rigs motions to us and we move forward hand in hand until we're standing in front of his podium. He looks more like the grim reaper than a proper preacher, with his black button-up shirt, dark jeans, and leather cut. Although he still believes in God, he disassociated himself from organized religion long ago, but somehow kept his belief in a higher power. His normally kindhearted personality turns when he's faced with child molesters, assholes who abuse women, or people trying to destroy our club. Once he turns, Rigs is capable of things few men are. I'm glad he's a close friend because, having him as an enemy would be dangerous.

He looks down at us, his expression serious and knowing. "Are you okay taking vows in front of everyone?"

It's a strange question, but I know he's asking because we're about to swear our undying commitment to each other without any intention of this being a permanent arrangement. Some small voice in the back of my head says it might end up being permanent.

I clear my throat and speak up. "I'm fine with there being witnesses. I trust that you'll find the right words to get us through this situation."

His expression shifts into one of happiness. When he glances at Ivy, she takes a moment to choose her words before speaking. "I don't mind because I know you are all close,

being club brothers and all. I just want you to know that I'll treat Tank right for however long we're together. I won't do anything to hurt his feelings or embarrass him."

Rigs snorts a laugh. "You'd have to get up pretty early in the morning to figure out ways to embarrass Tank."

Ivy's face lights up. "If I were the devious sort, I'd take that as a challenge."

Rigs shoots me an almost smile. "Careful, Tank, you've got a prankster on your hands."

"She's welcome to try, but like you said, she'd have to be pretty fuckin' clever to get one over on me."

The look on Ivy's face turns absolutely gleeful. Making this playful little minx happy is so gratifying that it immediately becomes my new favorite pastime. Everything about this woman hits me right in the feels. Even as Rigs knocks on his podium to get everyone's attention, I remind myself that she's too young for a man approaching forty.

He raises his voice to be heard. "May I have your attention please."

Haze rushes forward and presses a bouquet of red roses into Ivy's hands. The younger man is blushing wildly as he hurries away.

Ivy calls after him, "Thank you. I appreciate the bouquet."

Several brothers laugh at Haze's bashful behavior, but eventually they quiet down.

Rigs launches into his duties as the officiant. "We are here today to join two people together in marriage. I think of marriage not as the end of a courtship, but the beginning of a lifetime of shared adventure."

Ivy steals a glance up at me. With him mentioning a lifetime together, I'm acutely aware that the words he chooses aren't exactly tailored to our situation, but I know Rigs is going to deviate from traditional vows in a way that's not actually lying.

“During this journey, my wish is that you take the time to enjoy life’s little unexpected pleasures together and cleave to one another when the darkness comes. Remember that your love can always prevail in times of turmoil. Adversity will force you to learn and grow as individuals and make you stronger partners for each other. Remember you will always be stronger as one than either of you are individually.”

I can’t help but glance down at Ivy. It’s as if she can sense me looking at her, because her head tips up to look at me. When our eyes meet, some element of emotion I can’t quite name passes between us. Without really thinking about it, I slip one arm around her waist. I don’t have to pull her closer, because she leans into my embrace all on her own.

Rigs looks on, his expression approving. “That only leaves the subject of interpersonal conflict for me to speak on.”

Looking from one to the other of us, he continues. “I advise you to listen with an open mind, love with an open heart. Practice patience and understanding as you forge a life together. The world will test you. However, unity will prevail no matter the hurdles thrown in your path if you remember to comfort, respect, and put each other first.”

Turning toward the guests, Rigs intones, “You were invited here today by myself and the other club officers to bear witness as Tank and Ivy are joined in matrimony. I pray that you support them as they move forward to face the world as one.”

Like always, there are whoops and hollers from my club brothers as they enthusiastically embrace the idea of supporting us as a married couple. At a formal wedding, their behavior would be unheard of, but at this informal event, they feel emboldened to react more authentically. I’m glad for it and Ivy is smiling ear to ear.

When their voices die down, Rigs continues. “Tank, do you take Ivy Monroe to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, and to care for and protect when danger is near?”

I like the way he phrased that. There was no until death do us part. I'd always found talk of death during a wedding to be a bad omen and kind of tacky. I quickly pull out a set of wedding bands from the pocket of my cut. I slide the smaller one onto her finger and say, "I do," before turning her hand over and dropping the larger one in the palm of her hand.

She closes her hand around the small band of gold and blinks back tears.

Without missing a beat, Rigs speaks her half of the vows. "Ivy Monroe, do you take Rostein Jamison III to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, and to care for and keep humor alive in his life?"

Ivy's head snaps up and suddenly she is smiling at Rigs' reference to our earlier conversation. Several of my club brothers laugh, and Rider shouts, "Don't let him turn into a grumpy old man on us."

I glance over my shoulder and murmur, "Who's side are you on?"

This just gets more riotous laughter from my club brothers, but Ivy is still smiling and seems totally okay with the lighthearted interruption.

I look down into her eyes. "It's now or never time, princess. You ready to take the plunge?"

Her eyes go wide with surprise, as though she got distracted and totally forgot about the question Rigs asked. Her hand comes up, and when she opens it to see my wedding band there, she jumps into action.

Turning to Rigs, she exclaims, "Oh, I honestly do agree to take him in all the ways you said for my lawful husband. And don't worry, I'll make sure he's happy and laughs often."

There are some sighs and cutesy noises from the brothers, but it's pretty low key this time. Ivy grabs my hand with the same hand holding her bouquet. I can feel the silkiness of the flowers and it reminds me of how soft her skin is. She wiggles

the gold into place on the third finger of my left hand. When she looks up at me, I hear Rigs say, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I jump at the chance like a man starved of affection. I quickly cup her face in both hands and wait for some signal from her that kissing her is okay.

After a couple of seconds she whispers, “You kiss with your lips, not your eyes.”

“Just waiting for an invitation, sweetness,” I murmur as I lower my head and ghost my lips across hers. I’ll admit that I get a little lost in the kiss, never daring to use my tongue on her.

Rigs gives a gentle reminder to stop before I get carried away by clearing his throat.

When I pull back, Ivy’s eyes are glazed over and her expression is heated. It fills my soul with dark glee that she likes kissing me as much as I like having my lips on hers. I’m too old for her, that irritating little voice whispers again. That fucker is starting to get annoying, but he’s not wrong. Just looking down at her pretty face reminds me how much younger she is.

When we turn to face our guests, Cleo gives me that *what the fuck?* expression I’m so familiar with from her. I cringe on the inside because I know I’m overstepping with Ivy. I just can’t seem to stop myself.

Chapter 7

Ivy

I may have embarrassed myself at my fake wedding, but no one seems to care. The whole wedding ceremony is so unexpected and sweet that it makes my heart squeeze. I can tell it came straight from their hearts. His friends did a really good job of scrambling together the reception on such short notice. They're clearly so happy for us that they're bursting at the seams.

To be honest, I never thought anything so lovely would be possible for me. I always envisioned my marriage as something that took place at the courthouse. I thought we'd go to a nice restaurant afterward and I'd probably end up picking up the tab because Doug is notoriously cheap among his other onerous traits.

This celebration is absolutely fabulous. His friends are so authentic and down to earth, just my kind of people. I can't say that I'm particularly disappointed at not being able to invite anyone, Doug cut me off from my real friends years ago. Now, all I have are a few coworkers at the restaurant that I maintain casual relationships with. We've never gotten together outside work, so they'd likely be confused if they got a wedding invite from me. Not that this is a real marriage or anything.

Unfortunately, everything seems so genuine that I have to keep reminding myself this fantasy day is all fake. It makes me sad in a way that Tank and his friends are better at creating a fake wedding than anyone in my life would have been for a real wedding if Doug and I had tied the knot. I intentionally shove away thoughts of Doug because this is supposed to be a day filled with joy and happiness.

Tank shows me to a table filled with a multitude of brothers, including Cleo's husband, Siege. She perks up when I sit down and carefully lay my flowers aside after smelling them.

“You look lovely today, Ivy. Is everything okay between you and Tank?”

“Tank had a run-in with my ex and decided things were dire enough that we needed to move the wedding up. Apparently, there was a fistfight and Doug kept insisting I was still his for some godforsaken reason.”

Siege nodded decisively. “Men don’t like it when their exes move on, especially when they end up with someone better. It galls them, turns the degenerates into stalkers. I wouldn’t stand for some asshole stalking my Cleo. Tank was smart to go ahead and wife you up.”

Tank thumps down in the chair beside me and sets down a gigantic plate of food. “No talk of Ivy’s asshole ex, especially when we’re trying to eat.”

Cleo frowns at him. “Well, aren’t you exercising your domineering side today?”

I quickly interject, “Tank’s right. Talking about him makes me anxious. We broke up months ago and he’s officially blocked on everything. I don’t have to even think of him unless someone brings up his name.”

Cleo capitulates almost immediately. “Well then, we’ll let sleeping dogs lie.”

Tank grumbles, “Dog is right. The crazy fucker tried to bite a chunk outta me when I was kicking his ass.”

Shock rolls through my body. “Really? He tried to bite you?”

Tank grins wickedly at me. “No. I made that up. Score one for me, my cute little prankster.”

I laugh at his casual humor. “Don’t you worry, I’ll tag you back when you least expect it.”

Cleo looks from one to the other of us, her gaze assessing. When Tank cuts off a piece of steak and holds it up for me to eat, she sits back in her seat and doesn’t say a thing. I know this probably isn’t what she was expecting when she suggested we get married, but I figure if we get along and I can make it a

pleasant experience for him, then that's the best outcome imaginable.

We eat, and eventually it's time to slice the cake. Going through all the motions of a real wedding with a complete stranger should feel weird, but Tank is so easy-going and personable, I relax into the lie that has become my life. I feel a little guilty about that, but remind myself that it's the only way to protect my unborn child, and Tank did agree to it.

Cleo tells us about how she found two different sizes of white cake at her favorite bakery and the bakery owner showed her how to stack them together. It came out really nice and she decorated it with roses from my large bouquet.

Several people snap pictures with their cell phones as Tank puts his hand over mine and we make the first cut into the cake. We hold the pose for a moment and then proceed with cutting us a piece to share. We each feed a bite to the other with our fingers. He's so sweet and gentle that for a brief moment I wish he really was my new husband. I'm used to letting go of fantasies, though, so I immediately redirect my thinking on that issue.

Another of the club wives, Frannie, takes over cutting cake for everyone while Tank and I finish our cake and turn our attention to opening gifts. The first gift is a box of black tank tops with frilly straps that say 'Biker Baby On Board'. I tear up when I realize that everyone thinks Tank is the father of my child. Tank moves closer, one hand rubbing my back as the other drops down to rest protectively on my baby bump. This is when I realize that he's intent on protecting me from more than just my ex.

I reach for the next gift and the tag says it's from Siege and Cleo. Inside is a vest very much like the one the brother's wear. The more I look it over, the more I realize it's more similar to the one Cleo showed up in. It says Property of Tank, and below is their club name, Savage Legion MC, embroidered in neat letters.

"It's what we call a property cut," Siege explains. "It may seem old-fashioned, but as long as you wear Tank's cut,

everyone in this town will know you're protected. If anyone bothers you, they'll answer to our entire club."

"Oh. It's protection in the form of clothing."

Siege, Tank, and several others chuckle at my innocent description of one of their traditions. I wish this vest really were imbedded with special magical powers that would protect me when I was alone in the world. I know better, though. Too many bad things have happened for me to believe in fairy tales at this point in my life. Still, it's nice that Tank's club brothers want to protect me. I've never had that before. Suddenly, the elaborate nature of this hoax is beginning to wear on me.

Tank realizes I'm becoming emotional, wraps both arms around me, and lifts me into his lap. Without a word, he goes back to opening gifts. I just sit there, snuggling against his big warm body and slowly come to grips with the fact that I'm not only living a lie, I'm also putting Tank into a position where he has to lie on my behalf.

By the time Tank is finished unwrapping gifts, I've recovered my dignity enough to join the conversation. Cleo's expression is worried, but everyone else seems to have taken for granted that I was emotional over the thoughtfully chosen gifts.

Tank stands and puts me on my feet before leading me out to the center of the patio to dance. I remember how the bride and groom are supposed to have the first dance and pull myself together. I want Tank to have a nice memory, not one of me being an anxious disaster.

Once I'm in his arms, everything else melts away.

"How are you holding up?" he asks quietly.

I swallow thickly before answering. "I'm okay. This is just a lot more than I expected."

"You deserve so much better than a wedding thrown together at the last minute because I couldn't control my anxieties."

“What? Any woman would love this wedding. It’s been wonderful.”

“You deserve something nice. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Throwing money at something doesn’t make it nice. Being with friends and someone you care about is what’s important.”

His expression shifts. “Yeah, I kinda like it myself. I just thought women dream of their wedding day their whole life and want it to be special.”

“Well, I think it’s very special. I just don’t like lying to everyone.”

“My club brothers are all grownups. They can handle finding out we got married for alternative reasons. Trust me, they won’t care. If anything, they’d think me clever for getting a ring on your finger so you could get to know me and maybe want to stay married to me. When it comes to beautiful women, my club brothers are sly that way.”

I rush to reassure him. “Don’t worry, I won’t get attached to you and try to hold you down. Cleo already told me that you have an abundance of female companions. I’m not trying to make it awkward for you to live your life. It’s why I think having such a public wedding was a bad idea for you.”

He sighs. “Cleo has a big mouth and doesn’t always know what she’s talking about. I love her, don’t get me wrong. She’s my club president’s old lady and I’d do anything in the world for her, but she isn’t aware of everything to do with my personal life.”

I know all the way down to my bones that what he’s saying is that he married me as a favor to this woman he respects but wants me to know she doesn’t speak for him when it comes to his private life.

Several prospects go on a chocolate run and bring back bags every kind of chocolate imaginable. There is cheap kids’ chocolate, nice European chocolate, and everything in between. I get first pick and can hardly decide what to choose. I nibble away as the crowd begins to filter out.

The prospects stay behind to clear up, and Tank and I head inside for the night. This day seems to have lasted a week and I'm utterly exhausted. I've still got my box of gourmet chocolates clutched to my chest, though. I'm not letting them go for anything because I've never tasted anything so decadent before.

I watch Tank wander around, locking up, setting his security alarm, and turning off his lights. He smiles when he sees me at the bottom of the steps. "You didn't have to wait for me. I know you must be tired."

"I'm wiped out, to be honest."

He puts his hand in the small of my back and ushers me upstairs. "What you need is a good night's sleep, darlin'. Everything will look much better in the light of day."

I yawn and take the opportunity to toss another chocolate truffle into my mouth.

Tank just chuckles. "You do love your chocolate, don't you?"

I give him a decisive nod. "I've always loved it. My adoptive father used to bring me little boxes of chocolate when he went out of town for a few days. He said it was my treat for him not being around."

"Aw, that's all kinds of sweet. They were lucky to have found such a nice daughter to adopt."

I glance up at him. "I'm the lucky one, really. They were nice people who taught me manners and how to treat others with respect."

"I guess they missed the lesson how to be wary of a man until he proves his character, right?"

I nod, realizing he's hit the mark on that one. "They just thought everyone was kind and decent, and if you treated others with respect, they would do the same to you."

Tank reaches up to scratch the back of his neck, looking perplexed. "They must have led a charmed life. I'd love to say I've never met assholes, but that would be a blazing lie."

“So, what’s your perspective on people? Do you think most people are good at heart but have poor coping skills when things go wrong, or do you think that most people are bad but even bad people can do nice things occasionally?”

“I’ll have to think that one over. A question like that requires more brain power than I have right now.”

“Fair enough.” By that time, we are standing in front of my new room. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He grins and quips, “Good night, wife.”

I freeze as he turns and stumbles down the hall to his bedroom. My mind is racing with possibilities. It would be wonderful if it turned out to be like he said and us living together resulted in getting to know each other and falling in love. Tank is an amazing person, strong, brave, and willing to step up and get things done. Doug is just the opposite. He sits around playing video games all day while I work, pay the bills, cook, clean, and even take the car in for repairs. It’s an eye opener to see a real man in action.

I walk into my room and stand in front of the mirror, trying to figure out what Tank sees when he looks at me. I’m a bit of a curvy girl and getting curvier by the day, with a baby bump that my dress accentuates almost obscenely. Tank didn’t seem put off that I’m pregnant, but as we’re only married for appearances, I guess what he thinks of me doesn’t matter. I know what I see when I look at him though—and I feel a hot flush run through me the moment I think of his strong arms. Pregnancy hormones, I tell myself.

I toss my box of chocolate onto the bed and smooth my hand over my baby bump. Ever since Cleo asked me about what my life would look like if I could have anything, I’ve realized she’s right. I want to keep my baby in the worst way. But keeping my baby is not an option as long as Doug is lurking around, waiting to leverage me back into living with him. His free meal ticket got away and he’s really pissed off about that.

I pull the pins out of my hair and run my fingers through it. It takes me a minute of really concentrating to realize that I

might be considered conventionally pretty. My hair isn't bad and my facial features are delicate. I don't hate photographs of myself. I can't help but wonder if Tank thinks I'm pretty.

He said I was earlier and that I looked like a princess. He could have just been saying complimentary things to be nice. He's outgoing and has extremely good social skills. One might even say he has a silver tongue. That decides it for me. He's probably used to wealthy women who really take care of themselves, spend hours at the salon, and wear expensive designer clothes or women like the ones I saw at the clubhouse. There's no way he'd see me as anything other than a scruffy little girl who's one step away from being homeless.

I turn away from the mirror and pick up my chocolates. Shoving one in my mouth, I curse the fact that I'm not sophisticated or worldly like the other women in Tank's world.

Chapter 8

Tank

I wake up the next morning with a bit of a hangover. My feelings are all over the place. Doing right by Ivy is my highest priority. So, I focus on ways to prioritize her needs as I shower and get dressed. The shower goes a long way toward making me feel human. Now, all I need is some caffeine to get my day started. As I head downstairs, I get excited by the scent of fresh coffee and bacon cooking.

When I pass through the dining room, I see two place settings at the table, along with a carafe of coffee, some orange juice, and fresh fruit. I stop to pour myself a coffee. As I take the first delicious sip, Ivy walks in with two plates. One is piled high with protein and the other looks like she might be feeding a bird. I can guess which plate is mine, so I take it from her hand and put it on the table. Before I can get turned around, she's sitting in a chair off to the side, pouring juice into her glass.

I sit down, confused. "Where did I get juice?"

"Good morning to you too, handsome."

Embarrassed, I respond, "Sorry. I'm not fully awake yet. Good morning, wife. I hope you slept well."

Her expression morphs into one of amusement. "I did. Your bed is very comfortable. To answer your question, I made a store run at the crack of dawn. I woke up early and couldn't sleep."

Shock and anger war for top place in my emotions. "You went into town alone?"

She looks at me over the rim of her glass. "Yes, I did. But don't worry. I wore the vest your club president gave me. I gotta say, it worked like a charm. People were calling me ma'am for the first time in my life and scurrying to get out of my way at the checkout line."

I pick up my knife and fork, stab at the bacon on my plate, and shove a piece in my mouth. Chewing and swallowing before I speak is hard because I've got a lot to say. I throttle back my anger and state calmly, "You know the one and only person who won't give a damn about that cut is your asshole, right?"

She snorts a laugh. "Doug hasn't seen six a.m. since he was five. Super early in the morning has always been my safe time. It's probably why I'm so partial to breakfast. It's the one meal of the day I can enjoy without worrying about him popping up to grab me."

"I still don't like you being out alone," I insist stubbornly. "From now on, wake me up or call one of the prospects to shadow you. I'll send you their group text number."

She looks scared, and I realize she probably thinks she's traded one controlling asshole for another, "It's not a control thing, just with what happened with Doug we need to keep you safe."

Her mouth drops open. "You were sleeping, and I didn't want to bother you."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and count to ten under my breath.

"You're kind of cute when you're mad," she teases. "I like how you control yourself and don't make your anxieties and emotions my problem by going off on me."

"Unlike your asshole ex, I don't treat women that way. I'm not mad at you going, just what could have happened." She doesn't know about the Hendersons yet, that combined with Doug is really unsettling me. I want eyes on her at all times.

I try and push that to the back of my mind and focus on the breakfast she's so thoughtfully prepared. I gobble up a few more huge bites as I think about the situation. I absolutely love that this woman cooked for me, but I can't let her think that's expected. I'm supposed to be the one taking care of her, not the other way around.

I just launch into what is on my mind. “Look, I have a short list of things to talk to you about today.”

“That’s great,” she responds chipperly, “but I’m due at work in about an hour.”

I take one last gulp of coffee and put the cup down with more of a thunk than I intended. “Actually, that’s at the top of my list of things to talk to you about. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to work full-time and go to college. All your focus should be on taking care of yourself and your unborn child. Going to college is stressful and the coursework is time-consuming in itself without a full-time job on top of it. You’re a returning student, so it’s going to take even more effort for you to get used to a college environment.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t quit my job. How am I going to pay for my bills and buy groceries?”

“You don’t need a job. You’re living here with me now.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I still have bills and need to feed myself. I’ll need money to buy stuff for the baby if I end up keeping him or her. I can’t be unemployed. What about that don’t you understand?”

“You agreed to live with me and for me to be your protector.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect you to provide for us financially.”

“Too damn bad,” I bark. “You said you would love someone to take your child long enough for you to go to college so you can get a degree and be the provider they need. I agreed to be the person who helped you meet that goal.”

Her expression blanks out. “You do realize that it takes four years to get a college degree, right?”

“Yes. That’s exactly how long it took me to get my degree in business administration. Then it took another two to get my MBA. I can tell you firsthand that it is not going to be easy, but I’m here for it.”

I can tell she’s totally bewildered by my demands. “What exactly are you saying? Spell it out for me, because I don’t see

how this is supposed to work.”

I clear my throat and begin articulating my thoughts on the subject. “You were lucky to get a nice couple to adopt you. Not many people know this, but there is a human trafficking syndicate operating in this area. Both law enforcement and my club have been battling them for some time. So far, these people are untouchable.”

The color drains from her face. “Holy shit. Is this for real?”

“I wish Cleo had come clean with you so I don’t have to look like a complete idiot trying to explain it, but that’s why she got me involved. The second you approached social services asking about adoption, they targeted you. You’re here with me because Cleo and her supervisor at child protective services are afraid for you to be out on your own. Women and children have been abducted. We rescued a boy from an offender a few months back. It was gut wrenching.”

Ivy stands up, shaking her head. I watch as she makes her way to the door.

“Don’t do it, princess. What I’m saying is the truth, and I can prove it if you give me a chance.”

She stops with her hand on the doorknob. “I don’t want any of this to be true.”

“Yeah, nobody does. That’s why my club is doing everything we can to sniff out these bastards and get rid of them all.” Realizing what I said, I backtrack. “I mean, that’s why we’re tracking them down and turning them in to the police.”

She glances back to look at me and I can see the naked fear on her face. “You’re being serious right now, aren’t you? I thought it was super weird to go to social services and end up being talked into hooking up with you. Now it all makes so much sense. I’m not saying I believe you by any stretch of the imagination it just seems too far-fetched. But I’m willing to stay and talk to you about it.”

“I’m glad, but now you know why I freaked the fuck out when you went out alone. You’re likely on their radar now.”

Instead of coming back to the table, she leans against the door. “I get what you’re saying about the danger, but I can’t survive without a job.”

“Yes, you can. I’m prepared to transfer ten grand into your account today and a hefty monthly stipend while you’re in school. I’ll buy any and everything you need for the baby, accompany you to doctor’s appointments, and even hire a nanny if that’s what it takes.”

“I could never accept that kind of money from a virtual stranger, and it doesn’t even make sense for you to offer it.”

“You want to earn a living designing pretty buildings, right?”

“You saw my sketches?” Ivy asks tentatively.

“I sure did, and I think they’re amazing. In fact, I think you’re amazing and I’m willing to invest in your future so you and your baby can have a nice life.”

She looks more grief stricken than excited. “There’s no guarantee that I’ll get a job making enough money to pay you back. That part worries me.”

Fuck. I run one hand through my hair, exasperated enough with this situation to come clean about what I’m getting out of it. “To be honest, there is another reason Cleo introduced you to me. Remember when I said I’m doing this for my own reasons?”

Her expression turns hopeful. “You need to be married for some reason?”

“Yeah, one of the stipulations of my grandfather’s will. I was raised by him after my parents were killed in a boating accident. He came from money, and I guess I inherited his business acumen. I made my first million when I turned twenty-one and was still in the army. An investment paid off, and after leaving the military I made a career of it.”

Her expression turns relieved. “Oh, so the amount you’re talking about giving me is virtually meaningless in your world?”

“You could say that.”

“Then why are you so keen on getting your hands on your grandfather’s money? Is it a greed thing? I’ve heard that rich people can never have enough money.” She snaps her mouth shut and cringes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“It’s a fair question. No, I don’t *need* the money, as well as investments I own a tattoo parlor, I have money of my own and enough of it. The reason I want that money is to keep it out of the hands of my extended family. They’re all a bunch of evil bastards, toxic as hell, and their personalities begin and end with greed. I hate the idea of those money-grubbing fools inheriting my grandfather’s fortune. I can think of many ways to better use the money.”

“Maybe you could contest his will,” she suggests, trying to be helpful.

“I don’t need to contest the will. I’m the sole beneficiary. He stipulated in his will that if I’m not married within six months of his death, the whole inheritance is to be split among his extended family, including me.”

“You married me to get your hands on that money. That was a brilliant move. Congratulations on finding a way to help me and help yourself as well.”

The genuine pleasure in her voice tickles me. “You don’t think I’m an asshole for trying to keep the money all to myself?”

“You said they all have money and just want more, right? It’s not like they’ll be starving on the streets.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it. Here’s the thing, marrying you gets me over ten million dollars in cash and property. I can afford to be generous with the woman who unknowingly helped me fulfil the terms of my grandfather’s will. Hell, don’t get me wrong, but the money I’m spending on you and your little one is practically free money. It’s not really costing me a dime.”

Her expression turns doubtful. “You make this all sound okay, but I don’t believe there is such a thing as free money. It feels wrong somehow.”

I walk over and guide her to the sofa where we can sit down together. “Well, I promise you that it’s not. Here’s my plan. You give up your job and accept that college scholarship. I’ll support you and your little one through college. You let me protect you, not only from your ex, but also from the traffickers trying to get their hands on your baby.”

“I hate to take advantage of your kindness. Maybe I could make up for it by cooking and cleaning for you.”

“I have a housekeeper who comes every day. I’d hate to put her out of work, right?”

She nods. I can tell she’s given up fighting with me about this.

“I don’t want to make you feel as though you’re trapped here with me. If you would rather, I can make arrangements for you to stay at the clubhouse, you’d be safe there. I’m still willing to support you through college financially, whatever option you choose.”

She begins shaking her head before I even have the words out of my mouth. “I don’t want to stay with a bunch of strangers. You’ve been very nice to me and you’ve got a big place. I just hate to be so much of a burden, especially if you’re talking about supporting me through college.”

“You are no burden. Why would you think that you were?”

“When Cleo first spoke to me about this arrangement, I thought you would just be offering me a place to stay until the baby was born. I assumed everything in my life would stay the same. I would still be working and trying to figure out what to do about my pregnancy. Now, you’ve jumped the shark by offering me not only a place to stay, but an opportunity to go to college and the option of keeping my child. This is so much more than I anticipated or ever thought possible. I guess I’m just having a hard time wrapping my head around it.”

I don't think this was what she was expecting. It exceeds her expectation by such a wide margin that it makes her uncomfortable. I relax and talk her through it. "Having more options is a good thing, right? This is a situation where we're clearly helping each other. There's nothing wrong with both of us taking advantage of a good opportunity."

"Alright, when you phrase it like that, I'd be a fool to pass up a good thing."

Relief floods my chest. "I think you're making a good decision. This is going to work out for both of us. Just wait and see."

Her expression is one step away from grim resignation. "I don't mean to be disrespectful after everything you've done for me, but I feel like I need to talk to Cleo to verify what you said about the syndicate."

"Look, Ivy, I'm certainly not offended that you want to verify the things I've told you. I think that's a smart choice on your part and you need to know what kind of people you could be dealing with. If you want, I'll text Cleo and ask if she can see us this morning."

Ivy wraps both arms around her stomach before responding. "That would take a load off my mind. I feel like I'm making decisions for two now, so I can't be too careful."

She relaxes back into the sofa and watches as I text Cleo. I glance up after a short conversation.

"She can see us in an hour at her office, is that okay? She said if you can't make it then she could drop by this evening after work."

"Tomorrow works. I'll need to talk to my boss at the restaurant today."

"I'll go with you, just in case anything pops off. I've already shown you how to use the security system. Is there anything else you need to know about the house?"

"I'd like to know when your housekeeper is going to be here."

“It’s different times depending upon when she can fit me in. I’ll share my calendar with you. If you do the same with me, I’ll know when your doctor’s appointments are.”

She pulls out her cell phone and we take a minute sharing basic information we’ll need to know moving forward. It doesn’t take long, and we’re hooked into each other’s lives.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a set of keys. “I have an extra set of house keys for you, but I need to scan your fingerprints into the door scanner. It’s just more convenient than having to dig out the key every time.” I hand her the keys and we take a minute to scan her into the front and back door.

“There. All finished. If you want, we can stop by the restaurant and then we can stop by my bank and then go and see my lawyer. We can finish up with a trip to the college to check on your scholarship and do whatever admission paperwork you need to do.”

“I just need to pick my classes online and buy my books. I can pick my classes while you drive us to town. I will need to stop in and get a campus ID, though. I feel like I’m taking up your entire day.”

“Not at all. I believe in taking care of business rather than letting things pile up. If you give me your bank info, I’ll go ahead and make the deposit we talked about and I’ll set up that monthly stipend. When you’ve decided what you want to do regarding your pregnancy, please let me know. I realize it’s really none of my business, but I want to know how to best plan for our short-term future together.”

“That makes perfect sense. I haven’t had enough time to really think it through. But I gotta say with the generous offer you’ve made, my first inclination is to keep my baby. Adoption was an act of desperation because I didn’t have any way to support my child. What with my inconsistent hours at work, I’m already a month behind on my rent. The last thing I wanted was to end up homeless with a newborn.”

“That is never going to happen, not now that I’m in the picture.”

“Never say never, because no one knows what the future might hold. My adoptive mother used to tell me that.”

“Those are words of wisdom if I ever heard them. We should get a move on. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

Chapter 9

Ivy

I walk into Cleo's office to find not only her there, but her supervisor Mattie. I met her at my fake wedding, so I greet her warmly as we shake hands. "Thank you both for seeing me on such short notice."

Cleo gestures for me to have a seat. "It's no problem at all. I wanted to touch base with you anyway regarding how things are going with Tank. He was a lot more hands on than I expected him to be at the wedding."

I nod enthusiastically. "He's been amazing."

"I'm gonna need a little more than amazing. Help me understand what's going on between the two of you."

"Well, we originally discussed getting married on paper, so I would have a temporary place to live and my ex would finally understand that we're over. Tank also talked about being my protector because Doug was in the process of morphing into the world's most dedicated stalker, despite the protective order."

"That's exactly what's we planned. Tell me that's what's going on."

"Not exactly. Tank came clean about needing to get married in order to meet the terms of his grandfather's will. Marrying me enabled him to inherit quite a chunk of change. He's decided to spend some of that supporting me and my child while I get an education."

Cleo leans over the table and her gaze turns intense. "And are you okay with that?"

I shrug with one shoulder. "The man's apparently got more money than God, thanks to me marrying him. Tank explained that since it was found money rather than money he earned, I shouldn't object to him spending a little to make my life easier. I don't disagree with him about that."

Relief floods Cleo's expression. "Great. Then we don't have a problem, right?"

"Not exactly. Tank has put me on lockdown. I'm not allowed to go anywhere without him or an escort by the Savage Legion prospects."

Cleo and Mattie share that same knowing look all over again.

"Maybe with your ex running around, that's not such a bad idea," Mattie says.

"So what you're telling me is that all the things Tank said about human traffickers wanting my baby is just bullshit. Is that correct?"

The two women look stunned. Finally, Cleo says, "No. What he said isn't bullshit. It's just something we didn't want to burden you with knowing. You've been through a lot recently. Your stress level has been through the roof. Dumping something like this on your shoulders when you're already struggling just didn't make sense."

"Surely that's something I had the right to know about?" I ask, still horrified that stuff like this was going on in my hometown.

Mattie jumps into the conversation again. "We will tell you everything we know, but you have to agree to keep it confidential. The last thing we need in the middle of an investigation into human traffickers is someone running all around town panicking and talking about it to anyone who will listen."

"What are the police doing? Why the hell would you wanna keep something like this secret? Unless you are somehow part of it." I was getting hysterical, but the more I try to get my head around it all, the more unbelievable it seems.

Mattie stands, leans over with both hands on the table, and glares at me. "Cleo and I are not involved in the syndicate. We have risked our life to find missing kids. Getting between you and the syndicate was a dangerous thing to do, but we did it to protect you and your child."

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re keeping it secret.”

“It’s because no one’s snatching children off the street,” Cleo explains. “One hundred percent of the children who have gone missing were in the custody of the state. It’s more like they get shuffled around from one foster placement to another, and eventually the paper trail goes dead and we have no idea where they are. The syndicate’s involvement goes all the way up, maybe even to the top.”

“Holy shit. How many have there been?”

Mattie sneaks a quick glance at Cleo before saying, “We’ve got a dozen case files in this county alone spanning the last ten years.”

“Tank said there was an open police investigation and that the Savage Legion were actively searching for the missing children as well.”

“What he said is true. Savage Legion got involved when the traffickers tried to get custody of Siege’s niece and nephew after his sister passed away. He and I worked together and managed to recover two children that had been abducted and abused. With some persuasion the abductors begin giving information, including names of those in charge,” Cleo says.

“Oh my God. This is all real?”

“Yes, unfortunately it is.”

“What are the police doing?” I repeat.

Mattie shrugs, “Whoever is behind it has been covering their tracks for years, there’s nothing to point the finger at, let alone make any arrests.”

“How did you connect the traffickers with me?”

“The same couple who tried to get their hands on Siege’s niece and nephew contacted us within a few hours of your initial intake appointment. That makes us think that they have a mole working in our building. But, more importantly, it alerted us they had your newborn in their sights for possible trafficking. This is a very serious situation, Ivy. Our former supervisor worked for the traffickers, covering their trail. She

wound up dead one night, stuffed behind the dumpster outside. We think it was retaliation because she didn't do a good enough job covering up their evil deeds."

Cleo's words send a chill up my spine. "So why haven't that couple been taken in for questioning? Arrested?"

"His brother is a well-respected lawyer, their connections run so deep they are untouchable without rock solid evidence. And with zero evidence the police can't do a thing." Mattie says.

"Plus," Cleo interjects, "We don't know if the syndicate has people in the police. That's why Savage Legion are doing their own investigation. Obviously, Mattie and I aren't privy to club business, but I suspect that the MC is keeping some intel back from the police—just in case they are involved."

"The whole situation is terrifying" I say.

"That would be why I brought in the big guns," Cleo states firmly. "Tank is a good man. He's ex-military, smart, loyal, and dedicated. He's not gonna let anything happen to you or your unborn child."

I swallow thickly, fighting back my emotions. "Alright, then, I'll do what he says. So far, he's been good to me. I just hope I don't overstay my welcome."

Cleo reaches out and gives my hand a little squeeze. "Tank is a club officer. I hand picked him for the job because I believed in his ability and willingness to see this through to the end. No matter how long this takes, Mattie and I are here for you, as are Tank and his club."

"I'll do what I have to do to survive, just like always. I do trust Tank. Considering what you've just told me, I would like to withdraw the petition I made to put my child up for adoption. Since my marriage arrangement with Tank enables me to keep my child, that's the road I'm going to take."

Cleo smiles. "I'm pleased that we've managed to help you do that."

"Thank you for introducing me to Tank. He's an amazing benefactor. I can't sing his praises loud enough."

“I’m glad to hear you say that. You’ve been through a lot. It’s about time you caught a break.”

I walk out of the social services office feeling good about my decision to come here for answers. I also feel more certain about the decision to keep my child. I’m finally getting my footing in life and am looking forward to what the future holds.

When I climb back into the SUV outside, Tank’s expression is carefully blank. “How did your meeting with Cleo go? Did she answer all your questions?”

I reach for my seatbelt and snap it into place. “Yes. She was very informative, verified everything you told me and then some. I told her that under the circumstances, I’m no longer interested in adoption. Not only do I want to keep my child, but even if I didn’t, there’s too much risk in trying to arrange an adoption with those traffickers around.”

“If you’re sure that’s what you want, you know I’ll support your decision. I’m sorry you were targeted for exploitation that way. Now that you’ve withdrawn your request for them to arrange an adoption, that should hopefully be the end of it.”

“Agreed. Thanks for telling me about the traffickers. I don’t think Cleo and Mattie were planning to tell me I had a target on my back. They didn’t admit to anything until I straight up asked them about it, I know it’s just because they didn’t want to scare me, but still... Thank you.”

“Those two play their cards close to the vest. Cleo’s solution was to get me involved because I’m like a dog with a fucking bone when it comes to shit like this.”

“Well, I’m grateful to have your support. Knowing we’re both getting something out of this situation helps me not feel so guilty.”

“Cleo knew what she was doing when she linked the two of us together.”

“I’ve got to hand it to her. She really knows her stuff.” Taking a deep breath, I ask, “So, what’s next on our list of things to do today?”

“The next step is to talk to my attorney. I need to show him the official marriage certificate so he can get the ball rolling with my grandfather’s attorney on the will.”

His attorney’s office is only a few minutes away. For some reason, the receptionist is actively hostile to Tank. The minute we walk through the door, she jumps up from her desk and steps out in front of him. “Oh, no, you don’t. If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times that you can’t barge into his office without an appointment.”

Tank’s reaction is mild by comparison. “Calm down, Marge. He’s expecting me.”

“No, he isn’t,” she responds hotly. “If he were, your name would be on my appointment book, and it’s not.”

“Why do you always have to be such a hard ass?”

“You and your club brothers are always running in and out of here like you own the place. Why can’t any of you ever make an appointment? It’s not hard—you just pick up the phone and I schedule you in an open slot.”

Finally, irritation begins to tinge Tank’s voice. “You do realize that I’m the client. You’re not paying me to come here. I’m paying Smoke to see me. You act like the place is overflowing with clients. Every single time I come, the office is completely empty.”

She makes a disgruntled sound, does an about face, and goes back to sit behind her desk. “That’s beside the point. A lot of consultations are done virtually. You’re still interrupting our workflow.”

A deep voice sounds from the doorway across the room. “Marge, your OCD is getting the better of you again. You know Tank is one of my club brothers and he also has me on retainer. That means when he has an emergency, I shift appointments around.”

The older woman sighs. “If you just make an appointment, you wouldn’t have to shift appointments around, Mr. Drake.”

The attorney frowns, and gestures for us to come into his office. This man is younger than Tank, has brown hair, green

eyes, and is wearing an expensive suit with a little silk handkerchief barely visible in the front pocket of his suit jacket. From looking at him I'd never guess he was a member of the Savage Legion.

"I really don't think it's such a great idea for you to have an old lady working as your receptionist," Tank says casually as we walk in.

"Yeah, maybe you could tell her that on the way out, because she sure as hell doesn't listen to me."

"No can do, brother. I'm not up to risking life and limb for you today."

The other man snorts a laugh. "I swear, Marge came with the office."

"Not likely," Tank grumbles as he picks up an autographed baseball from Smoke's desk and tosses it into the air.

"Seriously, why would I lie? The first day I opened my office, she came in, sat down at the desk, and just started working. What was I supposed to do, throw her out?"

"She ain't working for free. Ergo, you must have hired her at some point."

Smoke starts looking over the marriage certificate "She does good work. And who has time to interview prospective employees?" His fingers linger over the raised seal for a brief moment. Then he looks up and smiles. "Everything looks like it's in order. You know your relatives are going to want to verify that your marriage is authentic, right?"

"How in the hell did they expect to do that? I mean, how does anyone prove another person's marriage is authentic?"

Smoke rubs at his left temple as though he has a migraine building there. "I assume they'll want you to show evidence of a prior relationship, verification that she resides in your home, her ID changed to reflect your address. That kind of thing."

"Easily enough done. Anything else I need to worry about with those vultures?"

“Didn’t you have a prenup you wanted me to review? That would be a strong indicator of a prior relationship.”

“I don’t wanna waste time on the prenup right now. Just forward what we’ve got and let me know what they say, okay?”

“Sure. Send copies of the ID, wedding pictures, and anything else that proves she resides with you. As soon as we prove you’re lawfully married, the terms of the will should be met. Is there anything else you want me to address today?”

“No. Let’s just stay focused on the will.”

“You got it, brother.”

Tank and I leave shortly thereafter. Thankfully, Marge is nowhere to be seen.

We stay busy for the better part of the day, stopping only to grab a bite to eat. Just as I’m starting to get exhausted, Tank takes us home. As we pull up to his house, I marvel at just how beautiful it is. The mansion has a neatly landscaped yard that’s an extra bit of luxury I’m not used to.

He encourages me to rest while he makes dinner. I don’t even entertain the idea of saying no because I’m just that tired. The nurse at the doctor’s office was right when she told me to expect tiredness in the first trimester. Maybe I can make dinner tomorrow or breakfast in the morning to make up for it. Then I remember that I’m the one who made breakfast this morning, so I guess it is his turn.

I fall into bed with my clothes on and curl up in the luxurious sheets. I tumble off to sleep to the realization that I’ve quit my job but am ten grand richer and I’m going to college after all. This whole situation seems like a wonderful dream come true. Everything except the part about human traffickers wanting my child. That part is nothing short of nightmarish. I don’t know how long I sleep, but it feels like hours. I sit up in bed as the aroma of roast chicken fills my nostrils. My stomach growls, prompting me to get up. I wash my face, brush my hair, and head downstairs to see if Tank needs help with dinner.

He's standing at his kitchen island scrolling through his phone. When I enter the room, he looks up, seeming none too pleased.

"Is everything okay?" I ask as worry niggles at the back of my mind.

"I just got a text from Cleo saying that someone has requested that a CPS case be opened on you. The reason they gave was reckless endangerment of your unborn child."

Bile rises in my throat. Only one person could have done something so despicable. "My ex must have found out that I'm pregnant. He's the only one I can think of who would do something so horrible."

Tank lowers his phone and looks at me intently. "Who knows you're pregnant apart from your doctor's office and the CPS? Your ex is an asshole, but I'm thinking it could have been the traffickers trying to get their hands on your baby. It's strange that you pulled out of your adoption agreement this morning, and this afternoon someone is pissed off enough to accuse you of endangering your fetus."

"Now that I think about it, my ex is much more likely to try to get a court order to establish paternity than accuse me of doing something horrible to my unborn child."

"You're giving him more credit than I would. I don't believe he has the motivation or patience for legal maneuvering. His signature move is trying to track you down so he can yell and scream in your face in hopes of you finding that behavior charming enough to lure you back into his life."

"Yeah, he's done that a bunch of times already and it didn't work. If there's one thing I've learned about Doug, it's not to underestimate him. He'll say and do things that wouldn't occur to any normally functioning human being. His behavior has surprised me more than once."

"Cleo and Mattie are in the process of discussing with their supervisors how to proceed with this complaint. In the meantime, all we can do is go on living our lives."

"Agreed. Whatever you made for dinner smells delicious."

“It’s lemon chicken and roasted vegetables. It’s my first time making it, so we’ll have to hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

When we sat down to eat, I find that I’m just picking up my food even though it’s really tasty. Doubt preys on the back of my mind. I never should have approached social services. That decision is turning out to be the worst decision of my life. If only I hadn’t entertained the idea of giving my child up for adoption, those traffickers never would have known we existed. If anything happens to my child, I’ll never forgive myself. Although Tank is nice and supportive, I can tell he’s exhausted too. We eat, clean up, and shove the dishes in the dishwasher before calling it a night. Even though I just slept, when I go to bed, I fall into a deep slumber.

Chapter 10

Ivy

I'd been living with Tank for coming up on two weeks. This morning I decide to make pancakes along with the bacon and eggs I usually serve. Sunday morning pancakes were a tradition when I was growing up, but I imagine Tank turning up his nose politely because they were nothing but carbs, and he was Mr. Caveman as far as diet was concerned. The man normally went superlight on carbs and heavy on protein.

I'm pleasantly surprised when Tank comes up behind me, barely touching the small of my back, and looks over my shoulder. "Ooh pancakes! They smell delicious."

"You planning to eat one or are you satisfied just smelling them?" I tease.

"One is not going to be enough," he answers. "I'll need four at least."

My head jerks around to look over my shoulder. "Are you being serious, Mr. Carbs-are-evil?"

"Yes ma'am, I am. If you want I can take over the griddle, while you set the table."

"I'd be delighted to turn the spatula over to you."

We switch places and begin carrying food out to the dining room. Over the last couple of weeks we've fallen into the habit of me making breakfast and him doing dinner. I normally get tired by late afternoon and usually need a short nap. Though the doctor tells me that once I'm in the second trimester I'll have more energy.

Tank is quite a talented grill master and after his first successful attempt at making lemon chicken he's become super enthusiastic in the kitchen. I get the feeling he's checking out cooking vlogs when I'm napping, but whatever the source of his newfound interest it's really working for him, because his food is hands down delicious.

He comes out just as I'm putting the orange juice out. His large stack of pancakes looks perfect.

"The Leaning Tower of Pancakes," I say, looking at the mountain on the plate.

"I figure we can have some for now and some for later."

"You must really love pancakes," I said with astonishment.

"I do and it's something I rarely eat, so I thought I'd make the most of the opportunity. I'm eating for two, right?" He winks at me.

"Um... I think you'll find that's the mom's prerogative." I say, giggling at the thought of this big burly biker getting sympathy pregnancy cravings.

"Worth a try," he says, as he forks another couple onto his plate.

I take some for myself and smother them with syrup, inhaling the delicious aroma. Since the morning sickness stopped everything tastes so good.

He takes a sip of his coffee before speaking. "I think I might drop into the tattoo shop later if you're okay with that?"

Tank owns the tattoo parlor next to the clubhouse. He drops in there occasionally, but from what I gather he's been letting his employees run the shop for the past couple of weeks while he's been helping me sort out everything.

"Yes, that's fine. I feel bad that you've been stuck here with me when you could be working. I've seen a couple of your designs laying around. You're a very talented artist."

He shoots me a warm look. "Thank you. It started as a hobby that I parleyed into a business venture. I'd like to introduce you to my two associates sometime."

"You mean employees?" I ask, because I was confused.

Tank stuffs a huge bite of pancake in his mouth and his eyes roll back with pleasure as he chews. "These are amazing. I can't remember the last time I had homemade pancakes."

After he snags another drink of his coffee, he answers my question. “Haze and Vapor are independent contractors who rent booths at my shop. They’re in the shop most days, while I’ve dialed back my work there in order to be more available to you.” After a thoughtful pause, he adds, “You met Haze and Vapor at our wedding, but I don’t know if you would remember them out of all the new faces you saw that night.”

After thinking it over for a minute, I admit, “I can’t put a face with the names right now but I’m certain that I’ll recognize them when I see them.”

Tank’s expression brightens as if he just thought of something pertinent to our conversation. “Haze was the one who brought you the bouquet of roses. I remember how he blushed when gave them to you. He’s the shyer of the two.”

“Now that mention it, I do remember him. When we visit your shop, I’ll be sure to thank him. Maybe you can even find something useful for me to do there? I could work behind the counter for a few hours a day until my classes start. Maybe even while I’m taking classes. I feel like time is dragging by because I’ve got nothing to do to fill up my day. I’m so used to being busy.”

Tank doesn’t look at me as he forks more food into his mouth. I start eating and give him a few minutes to think it over.

Finally, he swallows the mouthful. “I know how rough it’s been for you cooped up here. Now that it looks like things have calmed down with your ex, maybe we should get out more. You’re not a prisoner, it was just until everything settled. If you’re serious then I think you’d be a great addition to our little team. The only thing that gives me pause is thinking you might try to keep working even when things get overwhelming. Can you promise me that you’ll speak up as your pregnancy advances and your classes get more demanding?”

I can’t hide my excitement, Tank’s been so kind and I really want to find a way that I could repay that kindness, this would help him and also give me a sense of purpose. “Yes. Of

course I can do that. Thank you so much, Tank. I promise to let you know if it gets to be too much.”

He relaxes a little. “Since it’s always been just the three of us, we’ve never gone through the trouble of hiring anyone else. Having someone at the desk, even a couple of hours a day, will enable us to drop more ink, which is what we love to do.”

“I’ll be honest and just admit that I’ve been wanting to watch you work.”

He smiles and responds lightly, “Well, you’ve seen most of my work firsthand since I’ve dropped most of the ink my club brothers wear.”

“Really? That’s a lot of tattoos.”

He nods proudly. “I’d say a good seventy-five or eighty percent is mine.” He pauses for a thoughtful moment before he adds, “I’ve been working on a special design for Cloe. As you know, she and Siege adopted his sister’s twins when she passed away. And then Cloe gave birth to another set of twins a few months back.”

“She told me all about it. Apparently, twins run on both sides of their family.” I say, momentarily thanking my lucky stars that my scan showed just the one baby.

“She wants to get one set inked on each shoulder blade. It’ll be her first tattoo and in my opinion, she’s being a bit ambitious, it’s a bony area so sometimes it can hurt a bit more.”

“I’d love to see the design you’re working on, unless you like to keep them private.”

He smiles. “No, I don’t mind you seeing it.”

“Is she going to bring you a picture as reference? I imagine it would be hard to sketch from memory.”

“She already did,” he replies. “Let me get it for you.”

Tank pops the last bite of pancake into his mouth and gets to his feet. I begin stacking up our empty plates. When he comes back with an art portfolio. I shove the dishes away to

make room. He pulls out a drawing pad and opens it to an elaborate custom sketched tattoo. It's a set of wings shaped like a heart with little wide-eyed twins nestled into each round hump. A wide ribbon drapes across the bottom with Siege and Cloe's names and wedding date. The whole thing is extraordinarily detailed.

"Well, that is amazingly intricate. I think you're the one being ambitious, rather than Cloe."

"You might be right about that. Siege and Cloe fought hard for their relationship and family. Dropping ink on a lady is a much bigger deal than dropping ink on a guy. Guys tend to modify their tats but women tend to stick with what they've got."

"This is such a sweet idea. I would love to get a tattoo at some point."

Tank's hand comes up to rest on my back. I feel him rub his thumb over the outside of my shirt, as he gazes at me intently for a long moment. "I'd love to be the one to ink you. You have soft, delicate skin. You deserve someone who would take special care of you."

I feel locked in his gaze like the offer holds some kind of personal meaning for him. The sensation of him being so close and touching me makes me feel things. "I can't imagine anyone inking me other than you. I trust you to do a good job."

A look of pure male pride jumps onto his face. "I'm going to start working on something really special for you right now."

"You're sweet and I appreciate the gesture."

"Maybe we can come up with something together this morning. If you tell me what you like, I can create a design that's just for you. I was already blown away by your architectural sketches, I think between us we can create something awesome."

"I'm going to throw the dishes in the dishwasher while you set up your drawing supplies."

“Or since you cooked, I could clear up while you sharpen your drawing pencils, and we’ll meet up in the dining room.”

I want to give him a kiss on the cheek for being so nice, but I don’t think he would appreciate that very much. So, I thank him and head upstairs to rummage through my few remaining unpacked boxes for my sketch pads and drawing supplies.

We meet up in the living room, sitting together on the sofa and Tank moves a little closer.

“Tell me about the kinds of flowers and colors you like. Whatever pops into your mind.”

I relax back into the comfortable sofa with my sketch pad clutched close to my chest. “I like ivy vines, raindrops, roses and—”

He starts laughing.

“What?” I ask.

“Sorry I thought you were about to start singing that song about raindrops and roses and whiskers on kittens,” he grins.

I shove him playfully, “and those heart-shaped locks with fancy keys.”

He begins making notes on his pad. “Anything else come to mind?”

“Well, I’ve always liked crystal balls and wished I could look into one and see my future. I also think crowns are pretty. I used to draw musical notes on the cards I made for my parents because they represented the music we used to listen to together. I hope to continue that tradition with my own child.”

Tank keeps taking down what I’m saying and murmurs, “How about butterflies? I noticed you have them on a few things like your wallet and one of hair ornaments you wear.”

“I like butterflies, but I love dragonflies. Something about their wings is so captivating.”

“This is going to be a great design. I’m sure I can work in some of most of those things.”

He tears off the page with notes and flips to a blank page and begins sketching. I wiggle closer and get comfortable so I can watch his vision come to life. His big hands glide over the paper, making sharp swooping lines that end up being a crystal ball.

He murmurs, “You aren’t going to draw your buildings?”

“Later, I reply. “Right now I just want to watch you.”

He glances up at me, his brown eyes warm and admiring. “You like watching me sketch?”

“Of course. Your technique is so different from mine.”

He glances at my stack of rulers, “I don’t draw many straight edges, that’s for sure.”

“I feel like you’re more of a real artist than I am. My drawings are more technical.”

“They’re still beautiful in their own way,” he assures me.

“That’s sweet of you to say, Tank.”

“I like having you close like this. It feels intimate.”

Hearing that takes me by surprise. “I like hanging out with you too. I’m surprised we get along so well. I honestly thought things would be way more awkward.”

I’ve noticed as the days go by, that we’ve developed an easy way with each other. Sometimes my mind starts wandering and I have thoughts about what it would be like if he was really my husband.

I sit beside him, watching as he makes his first rough draft of the tattoo design. It’s all curves and delicate swirls. Slowly the form of an ivy vine takes shape, it looks just like the design on the blanket I had been wrapped in as a child. Adding that detail makes me tear up because it’s such a bittersweet memory.

I watch as he draws a pocket watch on a swirling chain with a heart shaped lock and key dangling down from it. Next comes a dragonfly with intricate wings. It was strange, artistic and whimsical. I absolutely loved it.

I toss my sketch pad aside and turn back to watch him create a work of art just for me.

Without looking up, he says, “I liked that you sat on my lap when you were having a hard time coping during our wedding. I like being the person you to come to when you’re wrestling with big feelings.”

“If I could, I’d be snuggled up in your lap right now.” I say, emboldened by our closeness.

He immediately opens his arms for me, with one hand clutching his sketch pad and the other holding his pencil. “Come on. You belong in my arms.”

I waste no time scrambling forward. Instead of sitting in his lap, I end up sitting in the circle of his arms with my cheek against his chest as he continues to sketch. By the time he’s finished with the design, I’m warm and dreaming of what my child would look like—and if Tank would wrap his big strong arms around both of us to keep us safe. In my daydreams my child looks like Tank.

“What do you think of my first prototype?”

“It looks more like a final draft to me. It’s perfect to my eyes.” Pausing for a moment as we look over his sketch, I ask, “Do you ever wonder what my baby will look like?”

“I think she’s going to have your delicate facial features and long pretty honey blond hair.”

“Would you hate it if it turns out to be a boy who looks like my ex.”

Tank shakes his head, looking serious, “Nah, I am a bit worried how you would feel having a reminder of him though.”

I bite my lip, it’s something that I have been wrestling with too, but I know deep in my heart that when my baby arrives then I’ll only see them, and the joyful future we have. Not the past and certainly not their father.”

I lay my head back down on his chest. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it.”

His arms close more tightly around me and he nuzzles his face in my hair. “You know, this would be the perfect moment to steal a kiss.”

I freeze in place and he notices. “Or not. We were just having such a nice time it made me want more.”

I smile up at him lazily and cup his face with my hands, like he had at the end of our wedding ceremony. “You read my mind.”

A slow smile appears on his handsome face, and he leans down. I quickly press my lips against his. I’m clumsy and eager, but Tank clearly doesn’t mind because he opens his mouth for me. Dying for a taste of him, I slick my tongue against his. This is all it takes for Tank to take control of the kiss by sliding one hand through my hair and pulling my head back so he can kiss me deeply. I don’t know how long we kiss but when we pull apart, breathless and aroused, he whispers, “You’re too...”

“...young,” I finish for him. I look up into his fully aroused face and decide that he is a good man for worrying about taking advantage of a younger woman but I wasn’t having it.

“I was going to say tempting, but now you say it—yes, I’m almost twenty years older than you.”

“Sixteen, don’t go prematurely aging yourself,” I tease. “That’s just more years of practice.”

“You’re playing with fire, my little dragonfly.”

He gets to his feet and stretches his hands up over his head, arching his back. It puts his package right in front of my face and I can clearly see the outline of this thick aroused cock jutting up to the point that it’s making the waistband of his jeans lift away from his body. And I’m totally there for it. Suddenly, he leans down to look into my eyes, planting one brawny arm on each side of me. “Be careful about biting off more than you chew, princess.”

With that, he turns around and strolls off in the direction of the garage, leaving me breathless and aroused. Damn, I

totally want some more of that. I pick up the tattoo he's drawn for me and begin engineering ways to enjoy his sweet lips some more.

Chapter 11

Ivy

One day slips into another. Before I know it, eleven days have passed. We've been in a holding pattern. Tank spends time in his home office, and I prepare for classes to start in a couple of weeks. I visited his tattoo parlor and we've even shared a few more stolen kisses. Being here with him is idyllic.

Cleo investigated the CPS complaint, ruled out abuse and neglect, and promptly shut the case with her supervisor's permission. She told us the report was anonymous, and there have thankfully no more allegations. Still, I have an eerie feeling something is not right. I worry that the traffickers may be lying in wait for an opportunity to get at my baby again.

I've also been living with the ever-present anxiety of never knowing if my Doug is going to pop up for one final scare. The club's IT guy has been snooping into his social media accounts, there's nothing to suggest he's up to anything. I assume he doesn't know about my pregnancy yet. If he did, he'd be kicking up a fuss and trying to get a paternity test.

After years of living on an emotional rollercoaster with Doug, being here with Tank is the first time I've been able to lay my head down on my pillow without worrying that Doug would come barreling through the door in a rage or, worse, stagger into bedroom wanting drunken sex. This is the first time I could rest easy and my body is taking full advantage of this newfound security, prompting me to sleep up to ten hours a night at times.

Tonight, as I sink deeper and deeper into the dream world, this situation with the traffickers shapes the worst nightmare I've had in a long time.

At first everything is fine. I'm walking along a stream, my backpack heavy. My stomach is flat, but the further I walk, the larger my belly gets until I'm waddling and about to pop.

That's when dark clouds begin to gather overhead. A storm is brewing, and when I look up, I can see the clouds are turning slowly in a circle. I start running from the funnel cloud, hoping to get away before it turns into a full-blown tornado. No matter how far I run, the funnel cloud stays directly overhead, gathering force with each second that passes.

When I'm totally out of energy, my stomach starts having sharp pains. I'm forced to slow down. The moment I do, the funnel cloud drops down and engulfs me. I panic as my body is picked up and hurled around in a gigantic circle inside the tornado. I try to grab onto something, but I can't.

The next thing I know, my child is being sucked out of my body by the force of the tornado. I reach out to put my arms around them, but someone else is there. It's a man, someone I don't know. He has dirty jeans, greasy hair, and when he smiles, I see that he has horrendous teeth. It's got to be a trafficker.

I try to move quickly and grab my baby, but he's already got his hand wrapped around my little one's leg and he's pulling my child away. I scream and my baby wails. I beg him to let go, but nothing stops the horrible man from stealing my child away. The moment I realize they're gone, I'm become hysterical, imagining all the horrible things he might do to my child.

The next thing I know, firm hands are shaking me awake.

"Ivy, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

I wake with a start, images of my baby being taken still running through my mind. The moment I see Tank, I throw myself into his arms. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I hang on for dear life.

"Hush now, everything's gonna be okay," he says soothingly. "It was just a bad dream, nothing more. You're safe here with me, Ivy,"

"I was caught in a storm and a trafficker took my baby. I tried to fight them off but I wasn't strong enough."

“It wasn’t real,” Tank’s soothing voice reminds me. “Your baby’s right here between us, safe and sound.”

My body is still trembling with fear and my heart feels the pain like I truly lost my child. I’m sick to my stomach to think that I thought about giving my child up for adoption.

“What if this is some kind of premonition?” I whisper.

Tank’s voice is calm, firm, and carries such strength. “It’s not. Trust me on that, darlin’.”

“I know, but what if they do get to us?”

“They won’t. You’re in my home. My security is tight. Plus, they’d have to go through me to get to you, and I’m not gonna make it easy for them.”

“Will you stay here with us, for protection?”

Tank freezes for a brief second before agreeing to spend the rest of the night in my bed. I lay back down and he curls himself around me. I close my eyes as he pulls the blankets up over us. Having his big, warm body so close makes me feel like nothing can get to us. This is the safest I’ve ever felt in my entire life. I drift off to sleep, basking in his warmth.

Chapter 12

Tank

I wake up in the morning with Ivy sprawled across my body like she owns me. I've been aware that she was sweet on me for a while now, but I can't believe she asked me to sleep with her for protection. She was terrified after her nightmare and not thinking clearly, but there was no way in hell I was going to leave her trembling in fear.

So I stayed, even though my body ached for her all night long. Even now my cock is painfully hard. I subtly shift my hips, so my hard-on isn't pressed against her. I am absolutely certain the last thing she wants to wake up to is my thunder cock first thing in the morning.

This beautiful woman shifts in her sleep and slings one long, delicate leg over my body. Her pussy is snug against my six pack and one arm is draped over my chest. I feel fucking guilty for loving this so fucking much.

Something tells me she's not going to be thrilled to find me in her bed, even though me being here was her idea. I start to ease myself out from under her, thinking she might prefer to wake up alone as opposed to finding herself on top of my big body.

I stop dead in my tracks when she murmurs in her sleep, "Tank, don't go."

When she grinds her pussy against my abs, I began to wonder if she really is asleep. My hands come up to rest around her waist to hold her in place. When she humps me harder, one of my hands slides down to her ass to press her more firmly against my body.

"Mm, what are you doing?" Her sleepy voice is accompanied by her head tilting up so she can look me in the eye.

I don't know what to say, so I lead with humor. "You were going a little wild there. I was trying to hold you still."

“What are you doing in my bed?” The question doesn’t sound angry. It sounds sleepy and amused.

I try to be serious because I don’t want to take advantage of her when she’s in a vulnerable state. “You had a nightmare and asked me to stay here for protection.”

“Did I promise you morning sex if you stood guard over me all night like a good little soldier?”

“Who the fuck are you and what did you do with my anxiety-riddled new wife?”

She giggles. “I’m still me. Just a well-rested, hornier version of me. It’s the pregnancy hormones, I think.”

“Oh wow, I didn’t think of that. Do you need me to do anything?”

She slowly rubs herself against me again. “Don’t you have husbandly duties to perform?”

Shock and lust war for top spots in my emotions. “Woah, what is going on this morning?”

“Do I have to spell it out? We’re both here, adults, and horny. If we have sex one morning, it doesn’t really change the equation for us, does it?”

I roll her words around in my mind. She’s suffering from her pregnancy hormones and needs me to do the one thing in the world I’m dying to do. This new wife of mine is wide awake and making logical arguments for us to work out our sexual frustration together. My mind keeps going back to part about her suffering and needing me.

“Alright, darlin’, you win. I’m gonna put you on your back and alleviate your suffering with my mouth.”

She melts against me as I roll us over and start running my hands over her soft skin. She’s wearing nothing but a bralette and panties. I lift the bralette, and when her breasts bounce out, I take turns sucking her nipples into tight little points.

When I move down to her stomach, I can’t help but stop and worship her baby bump. Splaying one hand across her

midsection, I can't help but wonder if the baby will like me or hate me.

When I get to her lace-covered pussy, I pull the panties down her hips and her long, silken limbs. When she opens her legs, I'm flooded with her scent. It's mouthwatering and I can't wait to taste her. First, I run my fingers through her soaked folds. This woman is so wet for me. Or maybe it's pregnancy. I'm pretending it's all because of me. She makes little sounds of pleasure as I explore her pussy. I love every second of having her under me and eager for my touch.

When my tongue claims the first lick, she's so excited that she just about comes off the bed. I hold her down and tease her clit with the tip of my tongue until she's breathless and begging me for more. Then I give her my best effort. She comes for the first time the moment I suck on her clit. Giving her oral pleasure feels like punching a virgin's V card. It takes me a few seconds to realize this is probably because although she's had sex, none of it was for her. That makes me redouble my efforts to make her come again. I slid one finger into her core and it only takes me a few seconds to find her g-spot. When I do, she goes wild beneath me. When I lick her clit and tap her g-spot at the same time, she comes screaming my name.

I give her some time to come down while I worship her belly some more. I don't even care that I didn't come. Ivy's needs will always come before my own. Finally, she slides down so that we're face to face in the huge king-size bed.

“Hi there. Ready for your turn?”

I shove my hard cock down and to the side because she's just being nice and he's way too eager this morning. “I'm good. Don't you worry about old Tank. I can take care of myself.”

“Isn't that kind of my job as your wife?”

I shake my head, wishing with my whole being that life were that fucking easy. “No, darlin'. I don't want you to ever think you owe me sex. Not sex for a place to live. Not sex for my protection. Or for money. Or even sex for sex.”

She runs one hand up my muscled chest. “How about sex just because I want you?”

“Do you, though?”

She gets onto her knees and shoves me onto my back. “I don’t believe in being wasteful, so we should use that hard-on while it’s staring us in the face.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

She nods rather enthusiastically. “Who else are we going to have occasional sex with if not each other? Remember, your prenap said we couldn’t be intimate with other people.”

“And you have those pregnancy hormones and no one to sooth the cravings, right?”

“You’re not wrong about that. Plus, if we don’t like it, we don’t have to do it again, right?”

I try not to be offended at her suggestion that we might not like it. I run my hands over her naked body, enjoying the feel of her. “If you don’t like riding my cock, you’ll be the first woman ever. I’ve got enough to please any woman.”

She stares down at my cock. “I see that. This might take some work, so let’s go slow, okay?”

“Absolutely. The last thing in the world I want is you hurting yourself on my cock. You being on top is a good idea because you can control the speed and depth.”

I help her lift herself up and grab my cock to guide it into place. Part of me can’t believe this is happening. That this beautiful young woman woke up and decided to have morning sex with me simply because I was in her bed when she was aroused.

When I feel her wet core slide over the head of my cock, I force myself not to thrust up. I let her decide if she really wants me and how much of me she wants to take. She presses down, forcing my ginormous cock into her pretty pussy until her body tenses up, then she stops.

“You okay, beautiful?”

She nods, her long blond hair cascading down around her shoulders. “Yeah, you just take some getting used to.”

“You look pretty sitting on my cock, and you feel heavenly wrapped around me this way.”

“I like that you don’t force yourself on me and that you say nice things instead of hurling insults.”

Her words make some small dark part of my personality want to track down her ex and put him in the ground. I won’t, though, because murder is nasty business. I’ll probably give him another beat down or two now that I know he’s been forcing himself on her and then think about killing him later.

When she starts moving again, I know bliss. Watching this woman moving on top of me is pure pleasure. I rub her clit while she rides me, taking me a little deeper each time she slides down my cock. I throw back my head and get lost in the feeling of her silky soft body moving against mine. It doesn’t take long before my balls draw up and I’m ready to paint her womb with my seed. Something about marking her feeds the most primitive part of my brain.

She’s making pretty sounds of pleasure, and when I press down on her clit, she drenches me with her orgasm. I let go and feel myself jetting inside her over and over again. She falls exhausted on my chest and we cuddle and eventually sleep again, our energy spent on lovemaking for the first time.

Later, after we’ve recovered, showered, and had breakfast, I get a call from Siege that we’re having an emergency meeting to talk about an attack on our bar in town. There was damage but no injuries. Even after explaining the situation to Ivy, I linger at the door, reluctant to leave my new love home alone.

“Are you sure you’ll be fine on your own for a few hours, Ivy?”

“Yes. I plan to unpack my last couple of boxes and rearrange my room.”

“I wanted to say thanks for this morning. You really made my day.”

Her expression morphs into one that seems like a mixture of pleasure and happiness with a slight overlay of arousal. “I should be the one thanking you. You have no idea how badly I needed that.”

“Well, anytime the urge strikes, just let me know.”

“Same with you. I’d be up for doing that again.”

It’s cute that she acting like we’re not going to be doing this a lot. “Alright, I’m going to go to my club meeting. I’m setting up the security system. Don’t open the door for anyone, especially people you don’t know.”

Her head tilts to the side. “I’m not a kid, you know.”

I look her up and down. “I’m all too aware of that, sweetness. Text me if you need anything. I should be back in a few hours.”

Walking out the door is the hardest thing I’ve done in a while, because all I want is to stay behind and talk to Ivy, get to know her better. This woman is all in the world I want. I’m beginning to crave her something fierce. She’s too young to get pinned down by an older man, though. Even if she likes me and enjoys having sex with me, I can’t have her until she’s had a chance to live and experience life a little. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

When I arrive at the clubhouse, everyone is in a tizzy. My best friend, Dutch, runs up to me and asks, “Did you hear what happened to the bar?”

“Siege told me there had been an attack but no injuries. Do you have any idea what went down?”

“Mel went down to the basement to grab more stock. When she came back, she found that someone had poured an entire bottle of whiskey onto the bar and lit it up. They had also written a message for the Savage Legion on the wall in red spray paint. It said *Time’s up*. What do you think that means?”

“Fuck if I know,” I respond angrily. “Who would do something like that?”

“It could be anyone,” Dutch replies. “My best guess is it’s the Hellfire Hounds. They’ve had about enough time to lick their wounds from the last run-in we had with them. Knowing those ignorant bastards, they’re probably ready for more.”

My wheels are turning in a different direction. “I think it could be those syndicate assholes. We killed one of their guys and disappeared his wife. They’ve got to know we’re on to them.”

Siege sticks his head out of the meeting room door and yells, “The meeting’s starting. Everyone grab a seat.”

Once we’re all in place, Siege wastes no time. “As you are all aware, our bar in town was attacked last night. Mel got to the fire in time, but it could have burned the entire place down if she hadn’t been there. Whoever these crazy fuckers were, they left a message for us on the wall—*Time’s up*. We’re unclear at this time if the message was meant for the Savage Legion or directed at the bar itself. Mel is busy writing her report, where she will list all the negative interactions she’s had with patrons over the last three or four months. I would like you to think back to see if you can think of anyone who’s been a problem or has made any threats toward us recently. I have a feeling that we can figure this out if we put our heads together.”

“Tank and I, our money is on the Hellfire Hounds or the syndicate,” Dutch offers.

“I think it’s someone who has an axe to grind with one of us individually,” Rigs theorizes. “Maybe even one of us who spends a lot of time at the bar. It seems to me if they were striking out at the club, they would have hit the clubhouse to make that point clear.”

I throw in my two cents. “I think that someone crazy enough to sneak into our bar after hours and set the fuckin’ place on fire and then spray paint threats on the wall is someone who’s mentally unstable. We can’t rely on someone like that to make subtle distinctions about what’s the best way to let our club know they’re pissed with us. Until we can come up with hard evidence, I think it could literally be anyone. I

would strongly caution us against retaliating until we're sure we know who the hell did this."

Siege responds quickly, "Any retaliation taken by the club needs to be after we've taken a vote. We can't have anybody out there starting shit with the Hounds. Because if that turns out to be incorrect information, we will be fighting a war on more than one front. That's a very dangerous situation to get ourselves into."

"We're still filling our ranks and we're not at full brotherhood yet," Rigs adds. We currently have too many prospects and not enough brothers to be making stupid mistakes like starting a war on two fronts simply because we can't be patient."

The entire time he's been talking, Zen has been typing away on his laptop. Suddenly, his hand shoots up into the air. "I've got something, boss. I pulled the security footage from the bar and a couple of businesses across the street. What I'm seeing here looks like Hellfire Hounds might be up to their dirty tricks again."

"Show us what you got Zen. Put it on the big screen so we can all see," Siege orders.

It takes Zen a minute to make that happen, but when he does, we all get a bird's eye view of what went down at the bar. The first thing we see is two men hanging around the back entrance. Zen speeds through the footage and we see the two men slip in through the side door after jimmying it open.

Zen changes to the camera inside the bar and we watch as one of the men pours a bottle of whiskey all over the bar top and then lights a match and throws it down. At the same time, the second guy is spray painting stupid shit on our wall with red spray paint. The weird part is that while the fire is raging, the two of them get into a fight with each other about something. There's no audio, so we'll probably never know exactly what it was they were arguing about, but they eventually decide to just to slip back out the side door. I hate that I recognize one of them immediately.

“I know all the Hounds by sight, and I don’t recognize either of these men,” Siege says.

“They’re not Hellfire Hounds. The one with the greasy hair that set the fire is my old lady’s ex. I gave him a beatdown a couple of weeks ago, and rather than picking a fight with me, he decided to do this stupid shit.”

Siege’s face lights up with unholy glee. “This is the fucker that’s been stalking her?”

I nod. “Yeah. He’s ignorant and stubborn. He’s also the kind of stupid that gets people killed.”

“What do you think the message meant?” Zen asked.

“Who the fuck knows. Maybe he’s given her some kind of time frame to come back to him. Or it could be his way of saying my time is up and he’s coming to kill me.”

Several of my club brothers burst out laughing, likely at the thought of this crazy piece of shit thinking he could kill me.

“The bottom line is Doug is going to be easy to track and even easier to kill. When we got into it, I wouldn’t even consider what happened a fair fight. The man has zero fighting skills because he’s wasted his whole life beating up women. If our brothers would like to take a vote, I would consider it an honor to take care of it myself.”

“What about his friend, do you know anything about him?”

“I’ve never seen him before. I can gather intel and report back.”

Siege thinks the situation over for a minute before speaking. “I say let’s be cautious on this one. Take Rigs and Dutch with you. Try to find out if the second guy has any kind of grudge against our club or if he was just along for the stupidest ride of his life. After we have all the information, we’ll take a vote on how to deal with this pair of assholes.”

Chapter 13

Ivy

Two hours after Tank leaves there is a knock at the door. I go down to have a look and find a clean-shaven man wearing a suit standing on the porch. He rings the doorbell again. I'm tempted to open the door, as he looks harmless. From his appearance, I bet he's one of Tank's business associates, an accountant or something like that.

When he buzzes again, I use the intercom and tell him, "I'm sorry, but Tank isn't here right now. Would you like to leave a message for him?"

"I'm actually looking for a woman by the name of Ivy Monroe."

Worry twists in my gut because I don't know this man, and well-dressed men like him have never visited me before. I'm not good at deceit, but I try to think on my feet. I can't very well say I don't live here because this is my official address. I just put it on my driver's license and my college paperwork. Instead of denying it, I say, "I'm sorry, she's not here at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?"

"My name is David Henderson. I'm a local advocate for children's rights and I would like to speak with Miss Monroe at her earliest convenience."

"I'm the housekeeper and I'm not allowed to open the door. If you have a business card, feel free to leave it in the mailbox and I'll pass your message along when she comes home."

Rather than responding or pulling out a business card, he takes out his cell phone and starts texting.

The more I look at this man over the security feed, the more worried I become. I can't think of any reason a children's advocate would want to talk to me. I literally have no child to advocate for at this point in time, so this doesn't make a bit of sense.

He eventually stops texting, pulls out a business card, and shoves it into the mailbox before turning and heading back down the walkway.

When he finally leaves, I'm so relieved I feel like I'm going to faint. Tank said I should text him if I need anything, and I decide this event qualifies. ***Just wanted to let you know I had a strange visitor.***

Tank: ***Tell me you didn't open the door.***

Me: ***I didn't. He identified himself as David Henderson. He wanted to talk to me, but I don't know him.***

Tank: ***Fuck. What did he want?***

Me: ***He claimed to be a children's advocate.***

Tank: ***Is he gone? Did you see his car pull out?***

Me: ***I talked to him through the security system.***

Tank: ***Fucking hell. He knows you're there?***

Me: ***I told him I was the housekeeper.***

Tank: ***Remember what I told you about those kids?***

Me: ***Yeah. Why do you ask?***

Tank: ***He was with the group responsible.***

My blood runs cold and I began to panic and I suddenly remember the conversation a couple of weeks ago with Cleo and Mattie. The couple who wanted to adopt my baby, one of them had a brother who was something high up in the legal world. ***Tank, I'm scared. I don't want to be here alone.***

Tank: ***Don't worry. I was on my way home when you called. I'm just a few minutes out.***

Me: ***Thank God. It seems like there is danger everywhere I turn.***

Tank: ***That's truer than you know. I want you to get dressed to ride on the back of my bike. Jeans, boots, and a comfortable top. Wear your property cut. I'm picking you and we're heading right back out. Tell you all about it when I get there.***

Me: *Okay. And thanks, Tank. I appreciate everything you're doing for me.*

Tank: *Not a problem. You be ready when I get there.*

I run upstairs, get dressed, and pull my hair back into a bun at the nape of my neck. Tank is as good as his word. I hear the throaty roar of his motorcycle before he comes into view. The minute I see him through the front room window, I disarm the security system and run outside to meet him, careful to reset the system again behind myself.

“What’s going on today, Tank?”

“It’s true that David Henderson is an advocate for children’s rights in this region. It puts him in the perfect position to know which children are vulnerable and how to get to them. He has a brother, and that brother and his wife were the ones who tried to get a hold of Siege’s niece and nephew and the ones who asked about your child. All three of them are involved in human trafficking. Be glad you didn’t open that door for him today, Ivy.”

“Holy shit.”

“These people are persistent. They would probably end up trafficking both you and your child if they got half a chance.”

I shake my head vehemently. “They’re not getting any more chances to take me because I’m gonna be wherever you are from now on.”

“College starts in a few weeks. Maybe I can get a couple of the prospects to shadow you and keep you safe when you go to class.”

“Maybe I should just put off going to college for a while. I can’t believe I thought my biggest problem in this world was my ex.”

“Oh, he’s been a problem too, more so than I thought him capable of being.”

“Oh my God. What did he do? Tell me he didn’t hurt someone.”

“No, he didn’t hurt anyone. He and one of his buddies came into the bar our club owns in the middle of town and set the damn place on fire. Then they scribbled stupid graffiti on the wall. I’m guessing this is his best attempt to get even with me for the beatdown that I gave him a couple of weeks ago. Our bartender was in the building at the time. Luckily managed to put the fire out before too much damage was done.”

Suddenly, I feel like I can’t breathe. “I can’t believe Doug would do something like that, right in the middle of town no less. He could have killed that poor woman, or the fire could have spread and burned down multiple businesses. I spent years trying to find the good in that man. I’m starting to think there isn’t any to find.”

“Don’t go blaming yourself for trying to see the good in people. That’s what decent people do. They give others the benefit of the doubt.”

“Well, clearly, I need to wise up because I gave Doug the benefit of the doubt for far too long.”

“We live and learn, Ivy. That’s all we can do.”

“I guess you’re right. I just wish I’d never met Doug.”

“I’m going to be tracking his ass down. Unfortunately, I can’t take you with me on that wayward expedition. I’m going to drop you off at the clubhouse. Rider’s old lady is going to come and sit with you until I come back. She can introduce you to the other wives and show you around.”

“I remember her from the wedding. Her name is Fran, right?”

Tank nods. “My club is really important to me, Ivy. I’m one of the founding members and have been involved for over a decade. The other members are closer than kin to me. It’s important that you get an opportunity to know and love the club as much as I do.”

I give him a small smile. “I’d love to spend some time getting comfortable there, and I’m certain I will find things to like about this club that you’re so fond of.”

“Attagirl. As long as we’re together, my club will be there to support you and the other old ladies will hopefully become some of your closest friends.”

“I’d really like that. It says something that women like Cleo and Frannie love the Savage Legion MC. They’re both really nice. I look up to Cleo. She seems so smart and kindhearted.”

“She is, and so is Fran. That’s one reason I think you’ll fit right in.”

Chapter 14

Tank

“You ready to ride, sweetness?”

She nods and her eyes light up when I pull a new helmet out of the storage compartment for her to wear. I picked it up on the way home, before I learned that traffickers had stopped by my house. It's silver with gold wings on either side. She stands still, patiently waiting while I strap it to her head. This woman looks good in a biker helmet. I help her onto my bike and within minutes we are zipping down the interstate, Ivy holding on to me tight.

At some point, she lays her head against my back. I get the feeling this woman loves the freedom of the open road almost as much as I do. I love having her on my bike. The more time I spend with her, the more enamored with her I become.

I take the scenic route and we end up at the clubhouse in a little over an hour. It's early afternoon, so the main room is just starting to fill up. There are four brothers milling around the pool table and three more at the bar. I spy three club girls, plus Mel serving drinks. She waves at me from the bar.

“How's it going, Tank? Can I get you something to drink?”

“Not right now. We're actually looking for Cleo. Have you seen her today?”

Mel grins. “She's holed up in Siege's office. If I were you, I would knock first.”

Immediately catching her drift, I say, “Go ahead and pour me a whiskey sour.” I turn to Ivy and ask, “What are you drinking today, wife?”

Mel looks down to her stomach and back up again. “I can make you a virgin daiquiri or piña colada.” She winks at Ivy and adds, “I'll be sure to make it a special.”

Ivy's expression turns worried. “What makes it a special?”

“The tears of all the brothers who will be lamenting the fact the Tank wifed you up before they had a chance to chat you up.”

Ivy laughs and I can practically see her anxiety melting away. “I’d love to try one of your special daiquiris, sans tears, please.”

Mel responds merrily, “Coming right up, one whiskey sour and one tearless daiquiri.”

“Better make mine a double,” I say before guiding Ivy to one of the tables along the wall.

While we wait for our drinks, I take out my cell phone and shoot Cleo a quick text to let her know we’re in the bar area. When I look up, Ivy’s looking the room over with a critical eye.

“When I was here before for our first meeting, I remember thinking the Savage Legion clubhouse reminded me of a pub or sports bar. Now I can see there’s a little more going on. You’ve got a nice bartender, pool tables, and even women to entertain your club brothers. How nice is that?”

I scratch at the back of my neck, like I have a tendency to do when I’m embarrassed. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk about the club girls. In case you’re wondering, they’re not prostitutes.”

Ivy raises both eyebrows in an expression of disbelief.

I glance over at Brittany and Lorri. They’re both wearing booty shorts and sequined halter tops with cowboy boots. I’m not sure exactly what look they were going for, but I’ve seen sex workers in the red-light district dressed similarly.

“I already know what you’re gonna say. Some of the vixens dress like sex workers, but they’re not. The only club girl who gets paid a salary is the bartender, Mel. She gets her regular salary for tending bar and another stipend on top of that for being head girl.”

Ivy rubs her hands over her baby bump, looking more confused than ever. “I’m not sure I understand what a head girl is.”

“The head girl is responsible for making sure the vixens follow certain rules. She reports rule breakers to our club president for possible disciplinary action, which is usually them being suspended from club property for various amounts of time. Most of the club girls don’t actually live here, but some stay over pretty often.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Who’s responsible for maintaining the club property? Do you have a maintenance crew or janitorial crew?”

I shake my head as I reach for the drinks Mel brings to our table. “No, we don’t have anything like that. The prospects are responsible for all the upkeep. Sometimes things break that they don’t know how to fix. When that happens, the rest of the club brothers pitch in. A few months ago, we had a water main break, and it took a team of six of us to dig the whole thing up and replace the pipes. It was a hot, sweaty mess but we got the job done.”

“That must be great to be able to rely on each other that way.”

“Yeah, it is. We like to be as independent as possible.” I watch her take a sip of her drink and ask, “How does your daiquiri taste?”

“It’s the best I’ve ever had. I don’t even miss the alcohol. Your bartender is a very talented lady.”

Before I can reply, Cleo shows up with Siege at her side. Cleo is the only one who sits down. Siege motions for me to come with him. I stand and look down at Ivy. “I’m going to leave you ladies and have a word with Siege. You can always text me if you need me, Ivy. Are you gonna be okay here with Cleo?”

“Absolutely. You can do what you need to do. I wanted to mention that my ex hangs around that bar on 22nd Street a lot. He lives at the long-stay hotel on the outskirts of town. We drifted apart after the breakup, so I can’t give you more specific information than that. To be quite honest, I stopped paying attention to what was going on with him months ago.”

I bend down to give her a kiss on the forehead. “Thanks for the intel, sweetheart. That information should make finding him a little easier.”

My new wife beams up at me, clearly happy to help me with my quest to find our arsonist. I’m secretly thrilled she’s willing to give up information on her ex so readily. To my mind it proves she no longer has feelings for him. Regardless of what her asshole ex thinks, they no longer share a bond. Smug satisfaction fills my mind knowing that the bond we share is growing stronger every day.

“You enjoy yourself with Cleo. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

I almost laugh when she calls after me, “Happy hunting. And watch your back with that jackass.”

The minute we close the door behind us inside Siege’s office, he drops down into the chair at his desk and stares up at me. “What the hell was all that about? I thought this was a protection assignment and here you are out in the bar slobbering all over her. Which brings up another thing I’ve been meaning to ask you about. What the hell was going on with the two of you at the wedding? Watching you dance together, feed each other cake, and seeing her snuggle in your lap was not what I was expecting. You two looked for all the world like you were getting married for real.”

I rake one hand through my hair and begin pacing back and forth in front of his desk. “We worked out a mutually advantageous agreement. I get my inheritance. She gets a safe place to stay and a monthly stipend until she graduates from college.”

Siege’s eyes narrow at me. I can tell I set off his bullshit detector big time. “Why do I feel like there’s more to this story than you’re telling me?”

I drop down in the seat across from him and launch into an explanation that will only make sense to Siege. “Remember when Cleo was pregnant? You said she was like a nymphomaniac, and it was all because of the pregnancy hormones.”

He nods. “Yeah, those were some good days. It’s never gonna happen again, though. Watching her give birth to twins tore me up. I can’t go through that again.”

Jesus, I hadn’t even thought about Ivy giving birth. I press on with the explanation. “Apparently, the increased sex drive isn’t just a Cleo thing. It must happen to a lot of pregnant women, because Ivy is going through that too.”

Understanding blooms on my friend’s face. “So you’re not taking advantage of a woman half your age. You’re just providing a public service.”

“She’s not half my age,” I say.

“Close enough, brother,” Siege adds with a smirk.

“What the hell am I supposed to say when she asked me for sex? Am I supposed to turn her away and tell her to go pick up a guy at a bar?”

“No, of course not,” Siege states diplomatically. “I don’t think you’re doing anything wrong by taking care of her needs. It’s just that you said she was staying with you until she finishes college. Women have a tendency to get attached to the dick they’re riding. You’ve told me a hundred times that you never wanted a wife and family. Remember how you said your goal in life was to be fucking club whores when you’re ninety?”

“Yeah, but that was before.”

Refusing to cut me any slack, Siege shoots back, “You mean before you met a young, vulnerable, pregnant woman looking for a way out of a domestic violence situation, right?”

“I know how this looks,” I start to explain. I want to tell him that he’s a fine one to talk to, going from single guy to instant daddy to his sister’s kids and then hooking up with Cleo, but it might get me a smackdown.

Luckily Siege cuts me off before I say something I might regret. “Forget about how it looks. I wouldn’t give two hoots if you had met her any other way than through Cleo. She came to you for help with a client. She wasn’t trying to play matchmaker.”

“I get that. I truly do. Maybe the two of you can get together and explain to Ivy all about how she’s too vulnerable right now to make decisions about her own personal life.”

“Goddamn, this is a cluster fuck of epic proportions. You’re both grown adults. No one can tell you who you should or shouldn’t fuck. That said, I want you to take special care with Ivy. Make sure you’re allowing her to make her own decisions, because if my old lady finds out you’re taking advantage of her in any way, her go-to move is going to be to deball you. And I’m gonna be the one holding you down for it.”

“Fucking hell, Siege, that kind of talk is uncalled for. Like you said, we’re both adults, and I’m not the one pursuing her. She’s the one pursuing me.”

“I can’t say I blame her. You’re a good catch. The club vixens have all been trying to get their hooks into you for years. I guess you were just waiting for a fresh face and the fake marriage.”

That last comment really gets under my skin, and I can’t hold my tongue any longer. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that exactly how you fucking came by your wife? The difference between you and me is all I had to do was make the offer, while you actually leveraged Cleo into marrying you.”

Siege looks absolutely bewildered. “You’ve actually met my wife, so you know she’s about as far away as one can get from being young and vulnerable.”

When I don’t immediately respond, Siege throws up his hands in exasperation. “Alright, I’ve given you my words of wisdom on the subject. What you do with those words is your business.”

“I’m glad we got that out of the way. Now we can get down to the real business at hand. I’m meeting up with Dutch and Rigs in twenty minutes. We’re gonna track down Doug and the asshole who helped him torch our bar.”

“It was nice of your new wife to give you intel on where to find him. When you get ahold of him and his friend, bring

them back here and put them in a cell downstairs. I want to have a little talk with both of them and find out if anyone else was involved in this.”

“Agreed. We have another problem.”

“What’s that?”

“David fucking Henderson showed up at my house today.”

“Fucking hell. What did you tell him?”

“Ivy was home alone and talked to him through my security system. She pretended to be my housekeeper and sent him away.”

“At least she’s showing good sense. These syndicate assholes are brazen as fuck. I can’t believe he just walked right up to your door like that.”

“You know what this tells me?”

Suddenly, Siege’s disgusted expression turns to one of delight. “It means he doesn’t know we’re on to him.”

“It looks that way, which will be an advantage for us when it comes to bringing the syndicate down.”

Siege and I continue brainstorming ways to stay one step ahead of the syndicate until Dutch and Rigs show up.

Chapter 15

Ivy

“How’s everything going with you and Tank? Are you still staying at his place? Has he been respecting your boundaries?” Cleo asks.

I’m not even going there with Cleo, while I like her and she seems like a nice woman, I’ve been slut shamed too many times in my life. Maybe I just get nervous around people in authority, like they’ll automatically judge me. “Everything with Tank is fine. Better than fine, in fact. What I want to talk to you about is David Henderson. He showed up at the house today.”

Cleo bolts forward in her seat and her eyes go wide. One hand comes out to grip the edge of the table so hard her knuckles go white. If I ever thought Tank was exaggerating regarding the traffickers, this is my verification that he wasn’t.

“Oh my God, what did he want?”

“I don’t know. I was too freaked out to let him in. You know, stranger danger and all that. Having an abusive ex has made suspicious almost to the point of paranoia. No one wearing a five-hundred-dollar suit and carrying a briefcase has ever visited me before, so when this guy knocked, I was too afraid to answer the door. I didn’t find out until later, when I talked to Tank, that he was involved with the trafficking.”

“It’s good that you’re cautious. The last thing in the world you want to do is come face to face with one of them.”

“It would have been helpful to know names and faces so I would know who to avoid.”

Cleo looks slightly chagrined. “Again, I’m sorry. I really should have thought of that. I have several images encrypted in my personal cloud that might help you understand what’s going on a little better.”

I wait patiently as she scrolls through her phone. She pulls her chair around to sit beside me and holds out her phone for me to see. She pulls up a picture of the man who visited earlier. He's staring into the camera, and there's something about his eyes that aren't quite right. I frown as I try to figure out what it is.

"As you know, this is David Henderson. I can tell by the look on your face that you've picked up on something else as well. Mattie and I think he's a sociopath. His expression is always inscrutably blank, just like in the picture. I've heard him speak at conventions and the man doesn't crack a smile when he tells a joke or show any emotion at all when he talks about the profound abuse of children. The only emotions I've ever seen him have been anger and maybe a little irritation."

"That's really creepy. How do you think he's connected to the traffickers exactly? He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who snatches women and children off the street and runs off with them."

Cleo pulls her phone back and scrolls some more. "No, he's not the kind of man to get his hands dirty. He's got people for that. We've run into a few of them already."

She holds out her phone again and this time it's displaying a smiling couple. Again, something's off with their presentation. Although their mouths are smiling, the smile doesn't quite reach their eyes.

Cleo explains, "This is Brent and Liza Henderson. When Siege and I got together, he was in the process of fighting for custody of his niece and nephew. This couple tried every dirty trick in the book to get custody of those twins."

"I'm guessing they're related to Mr. Dead Eyes, you said something about a brother?"

"Yes, David and Brent are brothers. Brent and Liza have had custody of foster kids who went missing. Their files say they were removed from their home by their case worker and taken to a long-term care facility. The file doesn't say where, and the kids were never heard from again. We believe a supervisor at social services pulled the files so no one would

see and follow up. The case worker who worked those cases is no longer with the department.”

I turn this situation over in my mind. “One dead end after another. Anyone looking back might think the paperwork just got misplaced or shrug it off as a case that fell through the cracks.”

Cleo nods. “Especially since there were years between the two placements with Brent and Liza Henderson.

“These traffickers do have a look about them,” I murmur as I gaze at the image.

Cleo pulls the phone back and hesitates for a brief moment. “I’m not sure how much you want to know about this situation. It’s a dark, twisted trail we’ve been following. How much information is too much for you to handle?”

“I want to know everything. I don’t care how deep and dark it is. I need to know. These people are targeting me and my child. I deserve to know what I’m up against.”

Cleo pulls up another image. This one is a well-dressed middle-aged woman. She has dark hair, brown eyes, and a cagey expression on her face.

Cleo explains quietly, “This is my former supervisor, Anita. All the children who have turned up missing so far have been in the foster care system. She was the supervisor I mentioned earlier. We believe Anita’s job was to cover their paper trail from the inside. She turned up dead, murdered in the wee hours of the morning outside the social services office. They found her body by the dumpster.”

My hand flies to my mouth. Cleo mentioned this before, but putting a face with the story makes it so much more real. Staring at this woman’s face and realizing she was actually murdered by the traffickers is chilling on a whole new level.

“If they would kill her to get what they want, they’ll definitely kill me. I’m a nobody, expendable, compared to this woman.”

“We actually think she was murdered because she failed to do her job. These traffickers are part of a criminal syndicate.

Once you're involved, it's for life, and they like to send strong messages about what happens if you fail in your duties to them."

"Is this like the mob or something?"

"Their operation is similar, but so far we haven't found any ties between them and organized crime families."

Cleo pulls up an image of a man with a black eye and a busted lip. She swipes to the next picture and it is of a woman who looks like she's been crying. And the third picture is of a little boy with his face blurred out for confidentiality. Something about the way he carried himself in the image makes me think he was scared.

"Tell me to stop when you don't wanna hear anymore," Cleo cautions. "The man's name was Mark Parker, and the woman was his wife Brea. They were both sucked into the syndicate when they were children and never got out. Mark was a pedophile. His reward for doing whatever the syndicate wanted was little boys. We tracked him down, rescued the little boy, and the club meted out justice for that little boy and the others he harmed."

I jump up from the table and run to the restroom. I barely manage to get to the sink in time. Seeing those pictures and hearing their stories really turned my stomach. I don't want this horrible stuff in my brain, but I need to know in order to protect myself and my unborn child. I'm sick about how close these people came to getting my child.

I know things like his happen in the world, I just never suspected they would happen to me or my child. Cleo was smart to introduce me to Tank. She knew exactly what I was up against and realized I needed a big, tough former soldier turned biker to protect me and my baby. I might have been wary about her, but now, I'm honestly in awe of this woman. Repaying her kindness will take a lifetime.

I wash my mouth out as best I can and head back out to the bar. Cleo is sitting at the table, tense and worried.

I do my best to assuage her fears. “I’m okay, it’s just morning sickness. It hits me off and on, not just in the morning.”

Empathy fills her face. “You don’t have to pretend to be okay, Ivy. I know how fucked up this situation is. It was easier for me to get my head around it because I worked at CPS, and although you never really get used to seeing abuse, it loses some of its shock value.”

“You said the boy got rescued. What happened to him? He’s not going to fall into a crack again, is he?”

“I carried him out of that house myself and arranged for an unofficial fostering with a family friend. She has a degree in psychology and a heart of gold. They live with her grandfather who is a wonderful role model. I check in on him regularly. The last time I visited, the whole family was fly fishing in a river that ran along the back of their property.”

“Thank you for helping that kid, Cleo. You’re doing God’s work on earth. I can’t thank you enough for introducing me to Tank.”

“Thank you. I am drawn to this kind of work because I want to make a difference in the world. Tank is good man and a strong fighter. He’s got the whole brotherhood behind him as well.”

The look on her face is still worried. “What are you not telling me?”

“The last piece of information I have to offer drives home how long and hard we’re going to have to fight to win against these people.”

I lean forward and put my arms on the table. “Hit me with it. I can take it.”

Cleo swallows thickly before speaking. “Mattie and I weren’t the first to uncover the fact that children were going missing. Another social worker by the name of Robert Evans discovered that a child placed with the Parkers was being abused. He learned about it from a teen girl he had placed in

the home. He reported it to his superiors and the police. No matter how hard he pushed, he couldn't get the boy removed."

"Wouldn't anyone at social services review the case? I also don't understand why the police wouldn't get involved. Keeping people safe is their freaking job."

"We believe the supervisor they killed was blocking everything at social services. And it seems as though either the police are compromised, or it could be someone in their chain of command believes whatever social services tells them."

"What happened? Did you rescue that boy as well?"

"No. Robert took the girl, her mother, and the boy and skipped town. They're living off the radar and are still safe. I managed to get a meeting with him and he's the one who told us it had been going on for a decade and where to find the missing files."

"I can't believe we can't rely on the institutions that are supposed to protect us in this situation."

"Unfortunately. My friend Mattie is now in the supervisor's position, so, of course, she'll jump on any hint of a child being harmed. The problem is, as soon as she does, there is a high probability she'll wind up dead like her predecessor."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Mattie and I have unofficially teamed up with Savage Legion to investigate. They can do things we can't, and are better prepared to handle any kind of backlash from the syndicate. When we spoke to you a couple of weeks ago and said the police were involved in the investigation, we may have overestimated their involvement to you."

"That sounds all kinds of illegal."

"I like to think of it as fighting fire with fire. If I felt like we'd get proper support from law enforcement, I'd rely on them but we don't know how far this goes. We have one contact there, a detective who is up for helping us. He's convinced that if we can find some hard evidence, he can get the support of his superiors. Otherwise, we just do nothing and let kids keep disappearing. That's not okay with me."

I take a deep breath and ask, “What can I do to help?”

“For starters, you can stay out of their crosshairs. It would be hard for us to continue with our investigation if we continually get distracted because you’re trying to interact with them.”

“Can’t we use the fact that they’re interested in me and my unborn child to set a trap?”

“Hell no. We’re not going to do anything like that because it would be too dangerous for you and for whoever is tasked with protecting you. Our IT specialist is trying to track down those missing kids. If we can find even one of them and track them back to the trafficker, that might be all the evidence we need to bust this case wide open.”

“I have to admit that sounds like a much better idea. Do you have any leads at this point?”

Cleo shrugs. “We’ve got a few, but I don’t know if they’re going to pan out. We’ll just have to wait and see what the brothers come up with.”

As I turn the situation over in my mind, it occurs to me to wonder if maybe in their quest for justice, the Savage Legion has done some things they’d rather the federal authorities not know about. She mentioned earlier that they had served justice to a pedophile. What does that even mean? Cleo is back to scrolling on her phone and I can tell by her demeanor that this conversation is over. She’s probably already told me much more than is wise. Instead of pushing my luck, I quickly agree when she offers to give me a tour of the building.

Chapter 16

Tank

It is around two in the afternoon when we roll up to the bar on 22nd Street. I already don't like what I was seeing. There are five motorcycles in the parking lot, all bearing Hellfire Hound insignia. We edge around to the alley running along the side of the building and park.

Rigs curses under his breath. "Looks like the Hounds have a new hangout."

Dutch gets off his bike and inspects the Hounds' rides. "Call it in, Rigs. This bike belongs to their club president. I'm not interested in having a run-in with King without backup. Especially since the last time we saw him he threatened to gun down every man in our club."

Rigs' call for assistance and gets several pings back from brothers who happened to be nearby. He shoves his phone back into his pocket and announces, "We've got seven on the way. I warned them to be in stealth mode."

I jump off my bike. "Or we could create a distraction to draw them out and then duck inside and look for our guy."

Rigs asks, "What did you have in mind?"

"Something you're not going to like," I respond cryptically.

Dutch warns, "Let's not do anything to set off a gang war with the Hounds."

I reach into the storage compartment on my bike and pull out a squeeze bottle with a built-in relief valve. "Let's set something on fire near the front of the building. That should be enough to get them to run out and have a look."

"Not the building," Rigs says firmly.

"No way. Burning down their favorite dive would definitely fall in the category of pissing King off."

Dutch, who had been scoping out our location, comes running back. “I found an old pallet and put it against the brick wall of the building to the right. I bet that old wood catches on fire pretty damn quick.”

“Let’s do it.”

We slip up the side of the building, careful to make sure we aren’t being seen. I douse the wood with gasoline and watch as Dutch removes several bullets from his gun and tosses them at the base of the wood.

“Pour the accelerant right on top of the bullets and then let’s get the hell out of shrapnel range. You want them to explode before anyone comes close,” Rigs says.

I empty most of the gasoline onto the bullets and then spray the rest right up the side of the building for dramatic effect. We check to make sure no one is around one more time and then I light it up with my trusty lighter. I’ve had the lighter since I was a teen. It was my father’s. He’d left it on the end table when we went on the boat that cost my parents their lives. It hasn’t failed me yet.

We turn and race toward the back of the building as fast as our legs will carry us. As Dutch jimmyes the back door open, we hear one bullet after another explode.

We slip inside unnoticed and find an office, storage room, and restroom. All three are empty. We hear someone shouting about fire and head out to the bar area.

People are staring out the window and talking about the fire, but other than the Hounds who rushed out to check on their bikes no one else seems to want to leave their beer behind long enough to go outside and gawk at it.

We walk around the room looking at faces trying to find Ivy’s asshole ex and his accomplice, taking advantage of the diversion our little fire caused. I can hear King yelling at his men outside as they try and stomp out the flames. None of the men in the bar match the two we’re looking for. Rigs walks into the unisex restroom and comes back out with the second man involved in the arson at our bar.

By this time, Haze and Vapor have showed up and are riding up and down the street, causing a distraction. They probably look like two young guys showing off in front of our rivals. King doesn't seem to be taking them too seriously. Several of the Hounds are jeering at the pair, calling them baby bikers.

A couple of the patrons notice us hustling the asshole out of the bar, but they don't seem to care, and their eyes swiftly return to their drinks. Bar patrons are notorious for minding their own business especially when that business might get them caught up in a beef between motorcycle clubs—and that's working to our advantage today.

Once we get him outside, Dutch searches the man's pockets while Rigs restrains him. I keep on the lookout for potential witnesses.

While the man babbles about how he didn't do anything and demands we let him go, I watch Dutch grab his wallet out of his back pocket and pluck out his driver's license.

"His name is Franklin Fontaine. That's a fancy name for such a scruffy guy."

"People call me Crash. You guys have had your fun at my expense. Now, give my wallet back and fuck off."

I step up to face him. "I don't think so, asshole. We've got you on camera setting fire to one of our businesses."

"That wasn't me," he swears, fighting to break free from Rigs. "You've got the wrong person."

"That's bullshit and you know it. Our club president wants to have a little talk with you and your friend, Doug. Do you have any idea where we can find him?"

"I don't know anybody by the name of Doug. I keep telling you that you've got the wrong guy."

Tired of his lies, I grab him by the throat. "Answer the fucking question."

"I've told you, I don't know anything. You're wasting your time knocking me around." He then tries to headbutt me.

I punch him square in the face and his nose starts gushing blood. “Did that jog your memory?”

“Asshole.”

I give him one more well-aimed gut punch and he crumples. After what seems like half an hour of coughing, he finally says, “Fine, I’ll tell you what you wanna know, you vicious bastard.”

I step back. “That’s more like it.”

“There is a motel at the edge of town near junction twenty-five. He’s on the first floor. Room one twenty-seven.”

“How the hell do you know that’s where he is today?”

“Because, man, he sleeps all day and he’s up all night. He’s been that way for years.”

“Smoke and Rider are only a couple of minutes out with the van,” Dutch says.

While waiting for the van, I decide to spend the little time we have trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. “Why did you two nimrods set fire to our bar? You had to know we’d come looking for you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he insists.

Rigs kicks the back of his knees and pushes him down into a kneeling position. “You better wise up,” he snarls. “We don’t have all fucking day to play twenty questions with you.”

I grab his hair and jerk his head back. “This is getting tedious. You’re being a dumbass. There are three of us and one of you. You need to stop playing around.”

“It was Doug’s idea. We were just supposed to spray threatening messages on the wall. Doug got the bright idea to set the place on fire.”

“What I want to know is why the fuck he wanted to do that and how the fuck he talked you into destroying club property.”

“I don’t know. He said he wanted to send a message. That’s honestly all I know, man.”

Just then Rider and Smoke jog up. “Is this the perp?” Smoke asks.

“Yeah, he was Doug’s sidekick. Siege wants a word with him.”

“Alright, we’ve got it from here.” Rider grabs Frank the minute Rigs lets him go and we leave them to the task of getting him in the van.

We get on our bikes and pull away from the building. Haze and Vapor are long gone. Within moments we’re heading out of town. Truth be told, I can’t wait to get my hands on Doug again. I remember the haunted look in Ivy’s eyes when she talked about him. He treated her like she was his property. My blood boils at the memory of how he talked about her. He deserves more than one beatdown for that shit.

It takes no time to get into the building. We just walk up to the door at the same time as a guest and walk in right behind them. The person doesn’t give any indication that they notice we didn’t have a security card. Room one twenty-seven is at the end of the hall. Rigs stands to the side and knocks several times, each getting progressively louder.

A voice that sounds like Doug’s shouts in a groggy voice, “Go the hell away. I’m sleeping.”

Rigs answers gruffly, “No can do. The guest in the room above you reported a broken toilet. The water line busted. We need to access to your bathroom for maintenance.”

“Come back later,” he groans.

“Sorry, it’s mandatory. If you don’t open the door, we’ll force the door with a master key. Whenever that happens, it automatically terminates your stay.”

We hear Doug cursing a blue streak inside the room. He fumbles around and finally opens the door. His face blanches when he sees us rush into the room, pushing him back.

“What the fuck are you guys doing? Get the fuck out.”

“Afraid not, dickhead. We have a score to settle with you.”

“If this is about Ivy, we already settled that score.”

“That’s a strange thing for you to say considering the last thing you said to me that day was *this isn’t over yet.*”

“I don’t understand why you’re here. What do you want from me?”

“We’re here because we caught you starting a fire at the bar we own. That was some seriously fucked up shit.”

“You’ve got the wrong man.”

“Yeah, that’s the same thing that your buddy Franklin said when we picked him up. After a little persuasion, he came clean and admitted that he went with you, but it’s all your fault. Denying it’s pretty stupid since you were caught on security camera.”

“I’m not saying nothing without my attorney present.”

“Jesus, you really do have shit for brains. Do we look like the fucking police to you?”

“Well, I’ve said everything I’m gonna say, so get the hell out of my room.”

“Look, asshole, you’re not so stupid you think you can set fire to our fucking property and there won’t be consequences. You’re coming with us right now to talk to our club president.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you assholes and you can’t make me,” Doug says stubbornly.

“They finally got Frank in the van. He tried to run from them three times and they had to chase him down. Their ETA is about five minutes,” Dutch informs us.

I look Doug in the eye and say, “You can either walk out of here on two legs or we can knock you the fuck out and drag you out of here. Your choice.”

“I’ll go down fighting if it’s all the same to you,” he decides.

I lean forward and grin. “That’s a terrible choice, and I’ll tell you why. We are three depraved fuckers. If we have to knock you out and throw you in the van, you’d be at a real

disadvantage being unconscious and all. Why we could do anything we wanted to you, and you wouldn't even know."

Doug's arrogant expression melts away and is replaced by one of naked fear. "Fucking fine. I'll go with you to talk to your club president. Talking is all that better happen, or so help me God, I'll make you regret it."

"Sounds good to me," I reply chipperly.

"You've got two minutes to get dressed," Rigs orders, kicking at some clothing on the floor.

The thought of this filthy fucker having his hands on Ivy is nothing short of infuriating. If I have my way, he'll be getting a dirt nap once Siege is finished wringing information out of the stupid fucker. I really hate this asshole for everything he put Ivy through.

We walk outside and the minute the van door slides open, I sling Doug inside. Rider catches him by the scruff of the neck, shoves him down into the seat beside him, and gives him a look that dares him to move. My club brother can be intimidating when he wants to be. I slide the door closed and head for my bike. This whole debacle is taking close to three hours. I can't wait to get back to the clubhouse. I wanted to check on Ivy, but I also wanted to help interrogate these two knuckleheads. Something tells me there is more going on here than meets the eye.

Chapter 17

Ivy

Cleo shows me around the club and introduces me to almost everyone. Worry niggles in the back of my mind that something has happened to Tank. I know he's a big, tough biker and could easily take Doug in a fair fight. The problem is that Doug hardly ever fights fair. He's sneaky, manipulative, and highly aggressive. There are a million and one ways he could get the jump on Tank, and I don't want to see my new husband hurt.

Cleo excuses herself to speak with her husband, and I head to the bar. I feel pretty comfortable talking to Mel. She makes me a refreshing iced tea that I sip as she washes glasses.

Suddenly, a woman in a sequined halter top and booty shorts lands on the barstool beside me. She's clearly one of the club girls. Before I can get turned around, she speaks. "You know, drinking a long island iced tea when you're pregnant is a really bad idea. It can lead to fetal syndrome."

I think she means fetal alcohol syndrome. I don't want to start anything with her, so I politely explain. "It's not a long island iced tea. It's just a plain old sweet tea, like they serve at restaurants."

"Are you sure about that? If I were lucky enough to land a guy like Tank, I wouldn't be foolish enough to endanger his unborn child."

What the fuck is up with this woman? "It's my baby too, and I would never do something selfish like drink alcohol while I'm pregnant."

"Well, I'm just saying, you have a good thing going for yourself with Tank. He's a fully patched brother and loaded on top of that. If you fuck up, there are other women here who would step into your place in a heartbeat."

I just shake my head at this woman, bewildered by her thought process and audacity.

I open my mouth to politely tell her to fuck off, when Mel speaks up. “Loraine, you know better than to hassle the wives.”

She blinks innocently and her voice turns sweet. “I wasn’t hassling. I was helping.”

Mel frowns at her, her expression turning more disapproving by the second. “No, you weren’t. You’re being catty and rude. If I hear you talking that way to one of the old ladies again, I’m going to recommend that Siege ban you from the club for a week.”

The woman makes a disgruntled sound. “Courtney was a better head girl than you are. She didn’t threaten to ban us for every small infraction. Siege really traded down when he picked you.”

“I get that you don’t like having to follow the rules, but I think you need to remember why Courtney got fired. It was for fucking with Siege’s wife. I’m just trying to help you not make the same mistake. It’s time for you move along and give the pregnant lady some breathing space.”

Loraine’s expression turns into a stubborn pout, and she grips her glass more tightly. “I’ve got just as much right to sit at this bar as she does.”

A deep masculine voice drifts from the back of the room. “Are you causing trouble, Loraine?” Siege is standing there with Cleo at his side.

Loraine whirls around and shakes her head. “No, sir. I was just trying to strike up a conversation. You know, be friendly to the new girl.”

Siege glances at Mel and she gives one tiny shake of her head.

Siege glares at Loraine. “Ivy isn’t a new girl. She’s the wife of a fully patched brother. You know better than to irritate a woman in a property cut.”

“I wasn’t. I promise. We were just talking about how bad alcohol is for a pregnant woman. That’s all.”

Siege looks irritated. “Everybody knows you have a thing for Tank, but you gotta let it go, girl. He’s spoken for, and Ivy ain’t the kind of woman you can scare off with snarky comments.”

For a second, Loraine looks almost contrite. Then she side-eyes me and says, “I don’t see what’s so great about her. She’s overweight and doesn’t seem all that bright.” Eyeing Cleo, she throws a veiled insult her way. “The brothers are terrible at picking old ladies. They look over the ones who are tried and true for women who aren’t half as pretty.”

Siege tilts his head as if he’s trying to figure out why she would make disparaging comments about his wife right in front of him. “You know, Loraine, you’ve always been a little whacky. Whacky can be fun, but you’re not fun anymore. I’m giving you a month’s ban to see if you find that nice, lighthearted part of your personality the brothers enjoyed so much before you started turning bitter.”

Loraine jumps to her feet and downs her martini. “I knew you’d end up kicking me out. It’s getting so none of us can say anything to the old ladies. They’re all precious little snowflakes. I guess our loyalty means nothing.”

Before Siege can respond, she storms out, slamming the door so hard the open sign falls off.

Cleo cuddles closer to Siege. “Well, that was fairly horrifying. I think the club girls are so used to being decorative they forget that a pretty face doesn’t mean much if the inside is rotten,” she pauses. “Sorry, did my inner bitch just come out there?”

Siege gives her a kiss on the cheek, “She deserved it, babe.”

Before I can think of anything to say, the front door flies open. Tank and several other club brothers barge through with Doug and another man in tow.

Doug catches sight of me. His eyes narrow when he glances down and sees my baby bump. My clothing accentuates it, so there is no mistaking the fact that I’m pregnant. He takes a step in my direction.

Tank smacks him hard on the back of the head and says, “Don’t even think about it, dirtbag.”

The other brothers keep shoving them along and through the door that leads to the club’s official meeting room.

Tank walks over to me, places one hand on my belly, and drops a kiss on my forehead. “Are you okay? I know seeing your ex must be pretty stressful, but we need to talk to him about why he set that fire at our bar.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little scared. I honestly don’t know what he would do if he caught me by myself.”

Tank squats down so he can look me in the eye. “That’s not going to happen. We’re keeping this fucker under lock and key. You have nothing to worry about.”

“You ladies relax. We’re just going to talk to them. Nothing more,” Siege says.

Cleo steps away from him and glances over her shoulder. “Do what you’ve got to do. I trust you, babe.”

I place my hand over Tank’s, which is still resting on my stomach. “I trust you too, Tank. I know that if you have to get rough with him, it’ll be a last resort.”

Chapter 18

Tank

We break into two teams and interrogate the prisoners separately. Of course, I take Doug. My wingman is Siege. We take him into one of the downstairs holding cells and chain him to the chair.

Doug starts to freak out. “What in the fuck are you doing? I agreed to come here voluntarily. There’s no need to chain me up like a dog.”

“If you’re not an animal, you should stop acting like one. What with all the beating up women, stalking, and arson, one might think you didn’t have a civilized bone in your fucking body.”

“I don’t beat on Ivy.”

I backhand him across the face. “Rule one, no lies. If you can’t tell the truth, you shut the fuck up. Got it?”

He nods with his lips pressed together.

I take a deep, calming breath to keep from ripping this man apart. “Now, let’s get started. Tell us why you set fire to our bar.”

“I didn’t know it was owned by Savage Legion.”

I smack him across the face. “If you’re going to keep lying like a bitch, I’m gonna bitch slap you every single time.”

Siege steps into the conversation, calm and professional. “We know that’s a lie because we make a special point of flying our club colors all over that bar. There are group pictures of our club members and our logo is etched into the mirror behind the bar. Now, answer Tank’s question before I lose patience with you.”

“You took my woman and beat me up. I wanted some payback.”

“Yeah, but why target the club instead of me?”

“I don’t know. I was drinking and didn’t know where to find you. Even if I did, you’d just beat me up again for getting in your face. You took the thing I love, and I damaged the thing you love. It seemed like an equal and balanced approach.”

Siege asks, “Did you know there was person in the bar when you set it on fire?”

“Yeah, that whore you’ve got tending bar. She had plenty of time to smell the smoke and get out, though.”

This time, Siege backhands him. “Mel isn’t a whore. She’s our employee.”

Doug shakes his head and spits blood onto the floor. “Sorry, dude. There’s no need to get all primitive on my ass. It was a simple mistake.”

“You’re a slow learner. Most men would have learned to choose their words more carefully by now.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to anticipate what fucking bikers want to hear.”

Siege just looks at me, clearly exasperated.

“Let’s take a minute to talk about Ivy. You understand that she’s married to me now, right?” I ask.

“Damn, dude, that was fast. I would ask what the rush is, but I already know. You wanted to get hitched before I found out she’s carrying my baby.”

“Not exactly. The wedding has been planned for weeks. Forgive us for not telling you, but you’ve been a bit of ridiculous asshole lately.”

Doug grins up at me, showing every bloody tooth in his head. “You know what this means, don’t you? That baby in her belly is mine. I’m going to be in her life whether you like it or not for eighteen long years.”

My hand is around his throat and choking the life out of him before I even think about it.

Siege pulls me off, but I’m not done with the man who has given my woman so much grief. “You’re a fucking idiot. I’ve

been fucking Ivy off and on for the last year or so. Why do you think she left your dumb ass?"

"That's not true. Ivy isn't the cheating type," he shoots back angrily.

"Then explain how you got her pregnant wearing fucking protection."

All the color drains from Doug's face.

"Ivy is far enough along for them to draw her blood for a paternity test. It'll prove the baby's mine. Why do you think she agreed to marry me? We get along really good, the sex is fucking out of this world, and I have enough money to take care of her and my child. If you were looking to be a dad, you're shit out of luck."

"Oh, I wasn't interested in being a dad. There are lots of people out there willing to adopt, some even pay to keep the woman during her pregnancy."

The fact that he links not wanting a baby with making money off the pregnancy set off warning bells in my head. I take out my boot knife.

Siege warns, "I don't give my approval for you to cut him. Not yet anyway."

"I'm not going to cut him. I want to see if he has ink."

Siege nods and I use the knife to cut his shirt off. He doesn't have any tats with gang or club affiliations. He does, however, have SYN branded into his chest, it looks new and there's a nasty infection around the bottom.

"You enjoy sinning so much you got the word branded onto your chest." I run my finger over the rough scabs.

His normally jeering expression shuts down and he refuses to look at me.

After a few silent moments, Siege is the first to speak. "It's not sin misspelled. It's an abbreviation for syndicate."

Shock rolls through my gut. "It that true? Are you working for the fucking syndicate?"

He doesn't respond and I'm too shocked to make him. Never in a fucking million years did it occur to me that he might be involved with the syndicate. This changes every fucking thing.

"You know what this means, right?" I ask Siege.

"Yeah, you know I do. Let's give him a bit to think things over."

We leave him securely chained to the chair and lock the door behind us. When we get to the other interrogation room, it's a complete bloodbath.

"What the fuck is going on here? I never authorized this level of violence," Siege barks.

"Just listen to the fucker," Rigs says.

Franklin rolls his head to the side and grins like a crazy man. "Your boys ask questions but they don't like the answers I give. They get especially angry when I talk about how much I enjoy carving women and kids up. I got an eye full of those pretty women when they brought us in. I'm betting one of them was yours. Was she the bitch behind the bar or the one with short hair?"

Rigs moves toward him with his blade out, but Siege shoves him back.

I ask, "How the fuck did he go from all mild mannered to a fucking lunatic inside of an hour?"

Rigs answers grimly, "It was like a switch got flipped."

"Cut off his fucking shirt. I want to see if he's branded like the other one," Siege commands.

"Branded? What the fuck are you talking about?" Dutch asks as Rigs begins cutting through the fabric of Franklin's shirt.

"What the fuck is that," Rigs asks when he sees the letters SYN revealed on the man's chest.

Siege responds grimly, "I believe the syndicate brands their members or at least those who do their dirty work. I also think

he's intentionally provoking you into killing him, so no more cutting for now."

Both Rigs and Dutch look about as shocked as I feel as they stare at the ugly brand on the man's body.

Franklin spits a mouthful of blood in their direction and then says, "Take a fucking picture. It'll last longer."

I don't know if the man is being flippant or trying to provoke a reaction out of us. One thing is for sure. We can't let him or Doug go. If we don't eliminate them, the syndicate certainly will. We've watched them tie up their loose ends several times.

Siege finally announces, "Let's give him a cooling down period. Leave the chains intact while we get a fucking beer."

Rigs mutters, "I second that motion. This is the craziest shit I've seen in a while."

We carefully lock the door behind us, wash up, and go back upstairs. Haze and Vapor are left to stand guard, one outside each door.

When we get upstairs, Siege heads for his table in the back of the bar. When Ivy sees me, she hops off her barstool and starts to come to me. I give my head a decisive shake, unable to deal with her calmly after our rough interrogation sessions.

Her eyes jump from me to the others, and I watch them go wide when she looks at Rigs. Even though we washed up, he still has fresh blood spatters on his clothing. She backs away slowly and gets back on her barstool. Mel leans over the bar and whispers something to her. Ivy gives a short nod and goes back to her drink and conversation with Cleo.

I'm glad about it, because my brothers and I need to talk some shit through. We wait until Mel drops some cold drafts on our table and we've gotten a drink or two down our throats.

Rigs is the first to speak. "What the ever-lovin' fuck is that we just saw?"

Dutch shakes his head, clearly rattled. "I don't know, but I've been around a long time and never seen anything like this

before. The way he didn't respond to coercion, threats, or even physical pain was weird."

"I've seen something like this before. In the military. I wish Rider was here. He could explain it better than me," Siege says quietly.

"Just spit it out. Tell us what you saw." Dutch's voice is filled with exasperation and his fists are clenched tight on the table.

Rigs seconds that. "Yeah, if you know anything, drop us a fucking clue. This is some weird-ass shit."

"I was called in to be a neutral observer during an interrogation by another branch of the armed services. It was part of some experimental checks and balances system they came up to make sure their special ops team members didn't stray into straight up torture."

"Did it work?" I ask.

"No. They eventually decided to go in another direction. Anyway, I watched them interrogate a prisoner. Much like we do, they started with simple questions and then advanced to pressuring the man. When that didn't work, they roughed him up. I called a time out when they started doing things that could leave bruises."

"Let me guess," I interject. "They ignored the fuck out of you."

"Yeah, they did. Those special ops soldiers had been tracking this guy through the desert for weeks, playing cat and mouse. They'd shot at each other, and he had killed one of their team members. They wanted information on where his home base was, but he wasn't giving that information up for love or money." Siege swallows thickly before continuing, a haunted look in his eyes. "It got ugly fast when they started cutting on him. The more they cut on him, the happier he got. At first, I couldn't figure it out why he kept saying things to inflame their anger, knowing they were going to eventually kill him. Then it hit me when he started praying for his God to take him and give him his heavenly reward."

“The dude didn’t think he could hold out much longer without telling them what they wanted to know,” Rigs guesses.

Siege’s hands closed tightly around his beer mug. “That’s what I thought at the time and still do. He was more afraid of betraying his friends than the death he’d been promised. At least in paradise he gets good food, happiness, and virgins.”

The bitterness in Siege’s voice chills my heart. “You think, Frank cares that much about protecting the syndicate?” I ask.

“Hell no. He fears them. Remember when we talked to that pedo, Rigs?”

Rigs closed his eyes for a second before answering. “I do. He said there was no way out of the syndicate. Once you were in, it was for life. The only way out was death, and failure meant a painful one.”

“Shit,” I curse under my breath. “He’d rather we slit his throat than whatever the syndicate would do to him.”

“That actually makes more sense than thinking he was reasonable and rational when we picked him up and turned into a raving lunatic once we started questioning him,” Dutch says.

I ask the million-dollar question. “What in the hell are we going to do with him?”

Rigs looks at me like I’ve grown two heads. “What the fuck do you mean, what are we going to do with him? You know what we’re going to do with the sick fuck, the same thing our club always does with those who are irredeemable.”

Dutch frowns at me. “He tried to burn down our bar with Mel still inside.”

“Technically, that was Doug. Are we really going to kill a man for spraying graffiti on the wall of our bar?”

Siege sighs tiredly and motions for Mel to bring more beers. “It does sound excessive when you say it like that.”

“Look,” I say. “He’s just a desperate fuck who got sucked into the syndicate as a child. We don’t have any evidence that

he's unredeemable. He's the fucking adult equivalent of the kids we're trying to save."

Dutch asks, "What makes you so sure he was taken as a child?"

Three sets of curious eyes turn on me at the same time and I do my best to explain. "It's the way his brand looks. It's smaller than Doug's scar and the skin around the edges is fucked up in the way it sometimes is when you get a really bad burn early in life and then your body grows up. I saw the same thing with my grandfather. He was caught in a burning stable as a boy and had a burn that ran from his left shoulder to his ribcage."

Siege pulls at his beard as he thinks it over. "Those scars did look different. Frank's was way more fucked up. I think you might be right, Tank."

Rigs is quiet for a moment before speaking. "I agree with Tank. As long as have no proof that he's done anything really fucked up, it would be wrong to serve club justice."

Dutch plays devil's advocate. "If he was taken by the syndicate as a kid, he's likely had to do some really fucked up shit to survive. What if by letting him go, he harms an innocent person or kills someone?"

Mel comes to our table with a tray of beers, and We wait for her to serve the drinks before resuming the conversation.

"I say it's not our place to play God," Siege says. "Doug is not walking out of here alive, but letting Frank go is not going to save the poor fucker's life. The syndicate will have him dead by the morning. It's six of one and half dozen of another."

"Then we figure something else out for him. Send him some place the syndicate can't find him. Get him into treatment. Give the poor bastard a fighting chance at recovery," I suggest.

Siege grumbles, "You gonna pay for that, Tank? Treatment is expensive and our club coffers are not overflowing at the moment."

“Fuck. Sure, I’ll pay for the sorry bastard to get treatment if that’s what it takes to save his miserable life.”

“Done. We’ll bring it up at our next club meeting. If the brothers agree, we see him to safety.”

“And where in the fuck is safety, the place where we’re one hundred percent sure the fucking syndicate can never find him?” Dutch asks, exasperated.

Siege turns to Rigs. “You got that Native tribe you know to give the pedo’s wife safe haven. Do you think they would do the same for Frank?”

“They might, but I’m not gonna ask them. Think about it. As far as we know, this lady is the one and only person who has ever escaped their grasp. I won’t risk her safety to help him. We need to think of something else.”

An idea comes to mind and pops out of my mouth before I can second guess it. “What if we put him in a mental health facility under a different name? They’re more likely to think we killed him than put him in a treatment facility.”

Siege downs the rest of his beer in one long gulp and then wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. “That’s an option, but I don’t think he’s gonna want to be in psychiatric facility. Another option is to send him to the east coast with an allied club. Let him run with the Vagabonds while he gets outpatient treatment. The Vagabonds can keep an eye on him in case he turns out to be unredeemable, like Rigs said.”

We all agree to bring that up at the next club meeting and I feel fairly confident that the brothers will agree to let him go with the Vagabonds. They owe Siege a favor, so I’m also fairly certain they’ll take him. Something in my chest loosens at the realization that I saved a man’s life. Relief surges through my body as I tip the rest of my beer into my mouth and it slides down my parched throat. After what we’ve been through, I feel like I could drink a fucking keg all by myself.

Rigs says, “Someone is going to have to talk to Frank. I elect Tank, since he’s got such a fucking way with words today.”

Before I can answer, Haze is standing at our table looking ten kinds of panicked. “We need you downstairs, boss. Right fucking now. It’s bad.”

We all get up and race to the basement like a pack of dogs escaping their kennel. The door to Frank’s interrogation room is open. Inside, Vapor is standing over Frank, forcing his head back, and has a wad of blood cloth stuffed into his mouth.

“The damn fucker chewed his tongue halfway off. I heard him grunting, looked through the window, and saw him spitting up blood, a lot of it. You gotta get Doc here right goddamn now.”

Rigs is already on his phone.

I walk over and pull Franklin’s head back further to make eye contact with him. “You need to stop. We’re not going to kill you or turn you over to the syndicate. We’re getting you the hell outta here, someplace safe. But you gotta work with us.”

Frank stares up at me, his eyes glittering with a combination of hatred, desperation, confusion, and just an ounce of hope.

I let his head go and shove his stringy hair out of his face. “This doesn’t have to be the end. With our help, you can put the syndicate in your rear view, go out to the east coast and stay with friends of ours. They’ll hide you, protect you, and give you work. We’re not gonna kill you for spraying graffiti on our walls. Do you understand?”

He finally nods.

“Everything’s gonna be alright. I promise you that”.

He stops struggling and lets Vapor tend to him.

Within ten minutes, Doc comes running with his rolling suitcase of medical supplies. Haze and Vapor help him set up shop.

I leave them to it and walk out of the room. On a whim, I look into Doug’s room to see if he’s tried to kill himself too. No such luck. He’s still trying to squirm out of his chains. Since I checked them myself, I know that’s not going to

happen. Siege stays behind to supervise the situation with Frank and I head upstairs, eager to get a shower and wash away all the blood all over me.

Chapter 19

Ivy

“**H**eads-up. Your man is back,” Mel tells me.

I swivel around on my stool to see Tank walk wearily into the room. He makes a beeline for me, and I can see his hands are covered in blood. I jump off the stool and rush to him. “Oh my God, are you okay?”

He holds up his hands. “Yeah, things went bad downstairs. I need to wash up. If you want to come upstairs to our room, I’ll tell you what I can.”

I nod, eager to get him upstairs and cleaned up. “You jump into the shower and I’ll get you some clean clothes.”

“I appreciate it, darlin’.”

Something about his tone is off. His voice sounds hollow and emotionless. I just know whatever happened has made him this way. When he turns to go, I rush in front of him and open the door for him and help him into the shower. I don’t know why I’m being so protective of this huge muscle-bound biker. I guess it’s because everyone is emotionally vulnerable, no matter how big and strong we are.

As he takes off his clothes, I start the shower for him. “Here, it’s nice and warm. Wash that blood off while I get you something to wear.”

It’s edging into evening and I know he hasn’t eaten today. I text Mel to send up food for him. Nothing matters more to me than taking care of Tank right now and I know I can count on her to help me.

I go through his bag and pull out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He doesn’t seem to have underwear, so he’ll just have to go commando. I rush back into the restroom and lay out some towels beside his clothing.

Tank is standing with his hands against the wall and his head down as the water cascades down his back. The blood is

all gone but he looks sad. I step closer, drawn to him in his time of need.

“Tank, are you okay? Is there anything I can do to help?”

He looks over his shoulder at me. I couldn't name the expression on his face if my life depended on it, but the pain in his eyes is obvious. Before I even realize what I'm doing, my hands are pulling at my clothing. Then I'm naked and stepping into the shower with him.

He wraps his arms around me and lifts me against the wall. I wrap my legs around his waist for stability, not for sex. He cups my face in his hands and looks into my eyes for a long, hard moment. His head drifts down until our lips are nearly toughing. “I need you, baby. I need you bad.”

His roughly spoken words decide it for me. I quickly wrap my arms around his neck and pull him the rest of the way down for a kiss. When our lips touch, it's a slow, barely there ghost of a kiss, as though he's afraid of scaring me off. If I ever was, I'm not afraid of him anymore. No, I just want to soothe him, show him that I care and that he's not alone.

One of his hands drops away from my face to hold me more snugly against his body and the other drifts to the back of my neck. He doesn't squeeze or give any indication that he's got a choking fantasy going on in his head. No, he wraps his hand around my neck and kind of uses it to hold me in place as his kisses become more passionate. There is an edge of desperation to his need and it lures me in.

Our need for one another flares. I realize that I'm grinding my pussy against his rock-hard abs and his stiff cock is bumping into my ass and lower back. It reminds me that this man of mind is packing some serious heat. Something about that flips all the right switches for me.

I lift myself up and without words, he knows what I want. One hand goes to position himself at my entrance. Only this time, I'm not in charge. He is. With his hand still on the back of my neck and the other wrapped around my back, he leverages me down onto his cock. He's needy and insistent.

Having a strong man in charge makes the desire swirling in my gut double and then triple. Suddenly, I'm pushing myself down as my greedy pussy takes him ever deeper. This time, I'm not satisfied with taking most of him. I want all of his ginormous cock. It's all for me because I'm his wife, I think gleefully. The little voice in the back of my head doesn't even disagree this time. No, she's as turned on as I am. We both finally want the same thing and we mean to have it.

Tank nips and sucks at the skin on my neck, making me quiver with delight. Feeling him spearing at me is everything in this moment. And then he pulls out and thrusts inside again, ever so careful not to pin my slightly protruding belly. All I want is more, more, more. I vaguely realize that I'm actually saying that to him. And he's giving me more of himself with each thrust. As my orgasm hits, I lean down and gently bite his chest. That's all it takes for my sexy biker to come. Feeling him spurting inside me as I clench around his cock is the most amazing pleasure I've ever known. Even though Tank comes, he keeps thrusting slowing. It makes my orgasm last for what seems like forever.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asks me.

"Of course not. You were amazing, like always. Are you going to wash me off? I'm a dirty girl now."

The slow grin on his face makes me glad I stepped into the shower with him. "Yeah, I'll scrub you up."

Instead of soaping me up, he sets me on my feet and drops to his knees. Before I can protest, he's licking my pussy clean with his tongue. It feels so good that I don't even think about telling him to stop. His tongue gently laps over the top of my clit as his big fingers hold my lips back. He stops every now and then to admire me and goes right back to it. I'm a greedy girl. That's why I fight my orgasm, even as he slides a finger inside me and taps my g-spot. It's only when he sucks my clit at the same that I lose the battle and come screaming his name and pulling his hair.

The smug satisfaction on his face when I fist his hair in my hands and practically yank his face away is priceless. God, I

love this man so hard. I don't care if this was just supposed to be a marriage of convenience. I want to make it a real one in the worse way. I can't even imagine a better husband than Tank. Even though there is an age gap, he's perfect for me.

Tank insists on soaping up my entire body, including my hair, and although his hands do wander, we manage to rinse off, dry, and head out to the bedroom. As I comb the tangles out of my hair, Tank does his security check thing wearing nothing but a towel.

"Check to see if they left a tray outside our door. I asked Mel to send us some dinner."

He smiles but it looks weary and worried on his handsome face. "I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I intend to enjoy every minute that we're together."

"It must be true what they say," I tease. "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

He glances over his shoulder and his expression brightens. "Well, sweetness, I think you found a shortcut."

Our silly banter feels warm and loving to me. Tank is becoming home for me. My hands drift down to smooth over my naked belly, since I mimicked Tank and wrapped my towel around my waist instead of my full body. It occurs to me that I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about my unborn child because I only recently found a way to keep him or her. I hope my child doesn't look like Doug, but even if they do, I'll love them with all my heart and claw out the eyes of anyone who mistreats them.

Tank walks back into the bedroom with a large tray.

"Let me guess. It's steak."

"Nope. It's chicken night. I believe it's chicken cordon bleu to be exact."

Suddenly interested, I walk on my knees to the edge of the bed. "Are you serious?"

He gives his head a little shake. "Of course not. It's steak, a baked potato, and veggies."

I can't help but laugh at his gentle teasing. "You're too much."

"That not what you said earlier."

I roll my eyes as he sets the tray down on the bed and lifts the dome. There is one plate piled high with steak, bacon, rolls, potatoes and carrots. "I guess having steak one more day won't kill me," I say as he cuts off a bite and feeds it to me.

"Well, you either need to fill your purse with chicken tenders or get used to steak when you're at the clubhouse. Ain't no brother here who would vote to change the menu."

I grab a roll and take a nibble before teasing him some more. "Are we about to have one of those real men eat steak conversations? If so, hard pass."

"Real men eat all kinds of food. I like it, but I also like a lot of other foods that the prospects aren't very proficient at cooking."

"Like what?" I keep the lighthearted conversation going so we don't stray into what just happened downstairs. Whatever it was, it affected him.

He finishes chewing the bite he just put in his mouth before answering. "I like Italian food, Asian food, and even did a raw food diet for a few months once. I'll eat anything that doesn't eat me first."

I laugh, charmed by this husband of mine. I picked up another roll and Tank looks down at my engagement ring and wedding band gleaming in the overhead lighting. A possessive expression jumps onto his face but is gone in an instant.

When he takes a large bite of his own roll, I ask, "Have you ever thought about how it would be if you and I ended up together for real?"

He begins choking on the bread, banging his fist into his chest several times to clear his airway. Since he's still making noises and sucking in breaths, I don't jump in and try to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Instead, I wait patiently for him to recover.

When he does, he admits, “That’s all I’ve thought about all day. I’ve never gotten along so well with a woman or wanted anyone as much as I want you. I know it wouldn’t work out, though.”

“Why do you think it wouldn’t work out? I know there is something eating at you by the look on your face.”

“You’re twenty-two and I’m fucking thirty-eight.”

“Are you saying that you’re more mature than me?”

He just nods gloomily and eats another bite of steak.

That really annoys me. “Well, you’re wrong about that. My parents died young, my dad in a car accident when I was a kid, and my mom got sick when I was in high school, I’ve had to grow up fast. Want to know why I don’t have any close friends?”

He doesn’t look at me, but answers my question. “Because your ex ran them all off?”

“Yeah, well, there’s that. But the thing is, I don’t really relate to people my age all that well. Waiting tables is hard work, and working a full-time job dealing with customers teaches you more about human behavior than investing, accounting, or lawyering.”

“Lawyering isn’t a word,” he says, smiling indulgently.

“Of course it is. It means working as a lawyer. Didn’t you ever play Scrabble?”

“Scrabble? I can’t say that I did. My grandfather and I preferred outdoor sports.”

“Well, you’re missing out. I used to play with my parents all the time. Anyway, as I was saying, I’m more mature than people my own age. They’re worrying about fashion, social media, school, and if their boyfriend really, really loves them or just likes the free sex.”

Tank throws back his head and laughs. “Women shouldn’t worry about if the man likes free sex. Trust me, we do.”

I frown at him. “Don’t try to pretend like you’re not falling for me, Tank. It’s written all over your face.”

He picks up a baby carrot and tosses it into his mouth. “Don’t act like you know me, princess. I’m a complicated man, and no woman has figured me out yet.”

Rolling my eyes, I state primly, “You’re a thirty-eight-year-old man with a heart of gold, high morals, and compassion to spare. That staggeringly large hero complex causes more problems than it solves for you in a day. You avoid commitment because you’re a wealthy man who grew up without a mother and you don’t know how to trust women.”

His gaze turns intense. I see a hint of admiration because I nailed his personality. Finally, he whispers, “I trust you, Ivy. Out of all the women in the world, I trust only you.”

I move closer to him on the bed. “Do you ever wonder why that is?”

He glances away. “Maybe because you’re open, honest, and treat me like a real person. It feels like you just have an old soul. Do you ever wonder if the eastern religions have it right and we’re all living one life after another in an effort to learn how to be the kind of person who puts others first?”

“That thought has crossed my mind. I can’t say for sure that I believe in reincarnation, though.”

“Well, I do,” he murmurs as he tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “The thing is, it’s not in your best interest to tie your life to someone so much older. You haven’t really begun to live your life and I’m in the middle of mine. Keeping you would be selfish, and I’m trying really hard in this lifetime to do right by people.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m pregnant. So whatever happens between us, I don’t think I’ll be spending the rest of my twenties partying. Besides, you’re in the prime of your life. Isn’t it a little early to be worried about your next life when you’ve got so much of this one left to live?”

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t be being honest if I didn’t tell you how I feel.”

I lean over and give him a kiss on the lips, one he enjoys because he kisses me back. When I pull away, his face is all dreamy looking. Making him happy feeds my soul in ways I can't begin to understand. "I'm going to keep working on you. Don't be surprised if I end up wearing you down."

He grins. "You can try. It might even work."

"Challenge accepted, Rostein Jamison III. I like having the last name of Jamison and I'm not giving it up without a fight."

He looks ever so pleased with the turn our conversation took. "Ivy Jamison does have a nice ring to it." After a thoughtful pause, he asks, "Have you thought of possible names for your child?"

"Not yet. Do you have any ideas?"

"Doug if it's a boy?" The sly tone of Tank's voice tells me he's not serious. He's teasing me the way I've been teasing him.

I give him a playful shove. "Are you trying to pick a fight? Cos it sounds like you are."

He chuckles and moves our food tray over to the desk. When he drops back down onto the bed, I roll over onto my side and gaze at him with my hands under my chin. "Are you ready to tell me what happened downstairs? We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I would really like to know."

His expression turns serious. "Doug's not going to be around anymore. We're sending him off permanently to think about his poor choices in life."

I tilt my head to the side. "What a strange turn of a phrase. Is this your way of saying he's going to be worm food?"

He shrugs his big shoulders. "He might end up people food."

Both my eyebrows shoot up. "How do your figure?"

He rolls over to face me and props his head on one hand. "Worms eat him. We dig up worms to fish with. Fish eats the worms. Humans eat fish."

“Thanks for that, babe. I may never eat fish again in my lifetime.”

“Stick to cod and tilapia. They’re saltwater fish. Although they may have inadvertently eaten a stray human deep in depths of the ocean, at least you can rest assured it’s not someone you dated.”

Oh, he thinks he’s out maneuvering me. Little does he know that give as good as I get. “Well, that all depends on where you dump the body. If you burry him at sea, I might just shun seafood too.”

“You’re a clever woman. I’ll give you that, sweetness. You definitely hold your own in any conversation I’ve had with you.”

“Then you should keep me. I’m really no trouble. I have a fantastic sense of humor and I don’t each much.”

“Damn, you’ve almost talked me into it. To have you in my life might be worth suffering through another reincarnation. I can always learn to be selfless in my next life.”

I grin at him, thrilled that he’s at least joking with me about us staying together long term. I gesture down to the growing bulge beneath his towel. “Maybe I could show you some of the fringe benefits of keeping me around.”

“Fucking hell, princess. Aren’t you tired?” He’s insinuating his answer is no, but the look on his face and the way his cock jumps tell me he’s more than interested.

I tug the towel loose from his waist and tell him bluntly, “I’m never too tired to suck your cock, babe.”

His face lights up. “Yeah, you say that now, but a few years from now, we’ll have a bunch of kids and you’ll probably be pretty tired of my cock. It’ll fall in the *been there, done that* category.”

“I sincerely doubt that. If I do get tired of your cock, then at least you have my jokes and Scrabble to look forward to.”

“So, you’re planning to make me play board games, are you?”

“You’ll love it. What’s a four-letter word that begins with S, ends with K, and has one vowel?”

“I’m liking this game already. Are you going to suck my cock or make me beg?”

“Haven’t you heard? Hot bikers don’t beg. They demand.”

His eyes are so intense and his aroused expression makes me feel sexy, though I know I’m about the furthest thing from attractive. “I was taught it was rude to demand thing from women, particularly sexual favors.”

“But how are we gonna play innocent virgin and sexy biker if you don’t twine your hand in my hair and order me to suck your cock like I own it?”

His hand comes out so fast, it takes my breath away. His fingers slide through my hair and he tugs me closer. “You’re playing with fire, princess. You lookin’ to get burned by me?”

“No. I’m just looking for a little heat. You up to the challenge?”

He pauses for a moment. “I’m not sure I recognize you in this moment. Sex games are the last thing in the world I expected from you. Where is all this coming from?”

I shrug casually. “I read and spent years imagining all the things I wanted to do with the right man.”

“You mean a man you can trust, right, princess?”

I nod and feel the slight edge of pain as he pulls my hair.

“Well, you can trust me not to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

He leans over and kisses me hard. My hand drifts down his chest and lands on his thick cock. When he pulls back and looks down, I make a show of slowly running my hand up and back down his dick. As he watches, he massages my scalp.

When his legs begin to tremble, he tugs on my hair. “Do it, Ivy. Suck my cock like you own it.”

I slide down his body, kissing and nipping at his skin like he does to me. When I am near his cock, I wrap both hands

around his hefty endowment. “You’re so big,” I murmur.

“I’ve been told that my whole life. Getting complimented for having good genetics isn’t really a compliment because it’s nothing I did.”

I stick out my tongue and lick all the way up, claiming the drop of precum on the tip. Glancing up at him, I say, “You taste amazing as well.”

As I suck him into my mouth, I hear him mumble, “That’s new. No one’s ever told me that before.”

I find that hard to believe. I know that every woman likes to think she’s not like other girls. The truth is women are as similar as they are different. Anyone who has had their mouth on this man must have noticed that his body is amazing and tastes like saltwater taffy. From now on, I plan to be the only one with access to his cock, because I’m possessive in my own way.

I concentrate on sucking him so hard my cheeks hollow out. I tease the underside of the tip and use my hands to stroke the part I can’t fit into my mouth. When one hand goes out to cup his balls, I realize they’re full and tight against his body. The moment I touch him, he gushes in my mouth. It’s unexpected, but that’s what I was after, so it’s all good.

When I pull back and lick his cock clean, he grumbles. “It’s not nice to make a man lose control that way, sweetness. We tell no one about this, got it?”

“Oh, I plan to tell every single person I meet that my mouth was so good you couldn’t even last five minutes. I’m going to tell that club girl, Lorraine or whatever her name is.”

“Is she giving you a hard time?”

“No, just going on and on about how great a wife she would have been for you.”

“Well, she’s not wrong about that.”

My head snaps up and I gape at him.

“She’s a nice girl and would make someone a nice old lady, just not me. I turned her down a long time ago because she’s

not what I want.”

I go back to laying on his chest. Curiosity gets the better of me. “What kind of woman did you always imagine you would end up with?”

He yawns as he rubs my back. “Truthfully, I never thought I would get married. I thought no woman would ever understand me or want me for me. Imagine my surprise when I bumped into you.”

A smile curves up the corners of my mouth. “You can’t be wild about marrying a pregnant woman, though. I know I’m not all that attractive with a big belly.”

His hand comes up to grip my hair and he gently tugs my head back to look me in the eyes. “Unless you want to suck off my next hard-on, you’ll stop talking about that pretty belly of yours.”

Surprise jolts through my body. He’s insinuating that he likes my rounded belly. I’m at that awkward stage where I mostly just look fat, but in the right outfit, people understand without asking that I’ve got a baby in there.

Tank chuckles. “Don’t look so shocked, sweetness. I love watching you grow another human being in your pretty body. In fact, it’s awe inspiring.” After a momentary pause he adds, “And sexy.”

“You feel it’s awe inspiring even though it’s not your baby?”

A stubborn expression jumps onto his face. “I think you’ll find that as long as I’ve got a marriage certificate with your name on it, that baby is mine. Say it out loud, princess. I want to hear the words come out of your mouth.”

“The baby I’m carrying belongs to you because you married me and presumably want to be a father.”

His hand tightens in my hair. “There is no presumably. As long as you give birth during our marriage and no other man contests it, according to the letter of the law, I’m the child’s father.”

The low-grade anxiety I've been carrying about being a single mother or Doug somehow getting joint custody slowly dissipates. I glance up at Tank's stern face.

"You're carrying Rostein Jamison the fourth or his sister. All our children will split my family fortune. It's convenient that I'm inheriting my grandfather's money. Along with my own, our kids will be set for life."

"They're still going to college, right?"

"Of course. Maybe. Probably. You know how kids are. We can't really make them do anything, but we can stipulate the conditions upon which they'll get their inheritance. Maybe that will motivate them. Who knows, though."

I grin at him. "You haven't really thought this through, have you?"

He shakes his head. "No. I'm still reveling in my good fortune of meeting you."

Chapter 20

Tank

I wake up in the morning in high spirits. Cock sucking aside, I believe Ivy agreed to stay married to me and have my babies. That was a goddamn miracle in and of itself, but the part that really got to me was her willingness to come to me when I needed consoling emotionally. Sorting through my emotions isn't the easiest thing. Somehow, it's easier to do with Ivy at my side.

I shower as quietly as possible and go downstairs to check on our prisoners. When I enter the basement, I see Haze and Frank playing checkers in the hallway. He has something wrapped around the bottom of his face that looks like the bandage from hell.

“How's it hanging, boys?”

Haze glances up at me. “Where did you come from?”

“I'll give you a fucking hint. I wasn't beamed into place by aliens. You really should have more situational awareness. If I'd been a snake, I could have bitten you before you even realized I was here.”

Frank makes a noise that sounds like laughter.

“How are you even walking around after nearly losing your fucking tongue? Shouldn't you be on bedrest or something?” I ask him.

He lifts up his arm and I see an IV line and bag attached to hook on the wall behind him.

“Doc said it's not good for him to be lying around. He needs to be up and walking. The IV gives him the equivalent of a steak dinner and the kind of meds that make a guy forget his tongue just got sutured back together.”

“If Doc said it, then it must for the best.” Glancing over at Frank, I explain, “You're gonna have to be here for next few

weeks until that tongue heals. Can't hand you off to the Vagabonds in the shape you're in."

"We're gonna have to come up with more things to pass the time. I'm already bored playing checkers and this asshole doesn't know how to play chess."

"Fucking hell, you can't play chess either. The last time you tried playing against Rigs, you were trying to move your bishop forward instead of diagonally."

Frank makes a noise that sounds like laughter again.

"They must be giving you some good shit in that IV, my friend. I'm gonna leave you to it. I need to meet up with Siege about some stuff."

"Catch you later, Tank."

"You too, Haze." I turn to Frank. "You take it easy. We'll talk more about the east coast soon."

Although he nods, his eyes are glassy because of the drugs Doc's giving him. I can't help but wonder if he is even going to remember this conversation. I can't resist having a look in Doug's cell. He's sitting in his chair, staring straight ahead. I knock on the window and his head slowly swivels around to look at me. For a brief second, I see what terrified Ivy enough to turn tail and run. There is a darkness in his eyes that he doesn't even try to hide. It sends a chill up my spine.

I turn away and head upstairs. First, I grab a cup of coffee and then go looking for Siege. He's an early riser like me. I find him in his office, scrolling on his phone with a steaming cup of coffee on the desk in front of him. I knock on the doorframe to get his attention. "Can I come in?"

"Yes. You're just the man I want to see."

"What's up, boss? Did I miss anything last night? I went to get a shower and Ivy and I ended up going to bed. It was an exhausting day for both of us."

"I get that. It wasn't a problem and nothing unusual happened. We stopped trying to get information out of Frank.

He's too heavily medicated to pay attention long enough to write down answers to our questions."

"I sure the fuck hope Doc was able to save the poor fucker's tongue."

"Doc said we won't know for sure for a few days. Apparently, mouths heal faster than other parts of the body because it has a good blood flow."

"Wow, you sounded like a doctor there for a minute," I tease him.

He frowns. "I'm simply repeating what Doc said."

I've long suspected that Siege doesn't really have a sense of humor, and this pretty much confirms it. "So, what did you want to talk to me about, boss?"

"Doug, of course."

"He's a dead man walking. If the club doesn't vote to put him down, I'll do it myself."

Siege puts his cell phone down on his desk and leans forward, glaring at me. "Calm the fuck down, Tank. You know there is a ninety-nine percent chance the brothers will vote for justice to be wrought on him."

"Then what did you want to talk about?"

"I'm giving you preference in both manner of death and who you want to terminate him."

"I want to do it. I gave him the chance to stop and he didn't. I still remember the knuckle-shaped bruises on Ivy's face. He's a scary fucker and I truly don't see him giving up on her. As long as he's alive, my wife is at risk, not to mention her unborn child. He's gotta go, Siege. The risk of allowing him to live is too high and keeping him here is not feasible. We'd have to have someone guarding him around the clock, and even then, he's going to figure out a way to escape and go running back to the syndicate."

"I agree. Killing is nasty business, though. What are you thinking about in terms of manner of termination?"

“After all the times he beat Ivy, I’d love to give him a taste of his own medicine and just beat the fucker to death. However, I find that I’m just not that blood thirsty. I’m thinking of something along the lines of cutting his wrists. In case anyone ever finds the body, they’ll think it was self-inflicted.”

Siege muses out loud, “In a way it was. He could have just stopped trying to get to Ivy at any time. After she got with you, he should have stepped off.”

“Yeah, with this asshole, I think it comes down to capacity. It’s almost like he can’t help himself. Beating up women and setting fires seem to be behaviors he can’t resist.”

“Mel’s lucky she realized the place was on fire and acted quickly.”

“You’ll get no pushback from me about that.”

“Have we heard if Hellfire Hounds realized we were in their bar last night?”

“I’m not hearing anything to that effect. So, either no one said anything, or they know we had no beef with them, and were after two scumbags who chose the wrong place to drink.”

I ask cautiously, “Has Cleo heard anything since she closed that CPS case on Ivy?”

“Smoke got social services to investigate and close the case quickly. He feels that since she is now married and has a nice home for her child, there’s no grounds for further complaints.”

“If that about wraps it up, I’d like to take my wife some breakfast.”

“Yeah, sure. Tell her I said hello,” Siege replies with a smile. “Remember, we’re having church in an hour and a half.”

“I’ve never been late for any of our club meetings in all the years I’ve been patched.”

“Yeah, but you’ve never had a distractingly beautiful wife to draw your attention away either. I know because I have one myself now.”

I grab a light breakfast of fruit, yogurt, muffins, and coffee. I'd noticed Ivy eating these things off and on, so it seemed like a good idea. When I get to our room, she's still sleeping. I must have worn her out last night.

Pride surges in my chest as I remember how she sucked my cock and how her hands felt on my balls. Her delicate hands skating over my tender flesh were heavenly. When I set the tray down, she stirs. I'm tempted to crawl back into the bed and lick her pretty pussy until she begs me to stop. But I don't because I've got church.

She sits up in bed and rubs the sleep from her eyes. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Yeah, I brought coffee and girly food."

She stretches her arm above her head, causing the blanket to slide down her torso enough to reveal her pretty breasts. I hand her a cup of coffee as I admire her beautiful form.

She takes a sip before asking, "What, pray tell, is girly food?"

I toss her a muffin. "Fruit and yogurt. Stuff that wouldn't keep all my muscles going until lunch."

She takes a gigantic bite out of the muffin as if to teach me a lesson of some sort. When she finishes chewing, she asks, "So, what's on your agenda for today?"

"First, we have a club meeting here in an hour or so. This is an important meeting so I can't miss it. I thought after that I might take my wife shopping for baby stuff and talk about baby names. Maybe have lunch in town. What do you think?"

Her face lights up. "I'd love that. I haven't really thought about how to decorate the nursery."

I toss a piece of pineapple into my mouth. "I think the best way to get ideas is to see what's out there. Something will strike your fancy."

She nibbles her muffin and nodded. "I'm sure you're right. This is such a pleasant surprise."

“And the best part is you don’t have to worry about your ex popping up and trying to force you into his vehicle, cos he’s on lockdown in our basement.”

She looks panicked all of a sudden. “Are you sure he can’t escape?”

I sit down on the bed beside her and cup the side of her face with one hand. “I checked his restraints myself. There’s no way he’s getting outta there, sweetness. You’re finally free.”

She sits there in stunned disbelief for a moment. Then she looks at me and exclaims, “It’s finally over. I almost can’t believe it’s really happening. I thought I’d be running from him for the rest of my life.”

“Nope. You’ve got me on the job now and I won’t allow anyone to harm you, threaten you, or intimidate you.”

She throws herself into my arms and cries happy tears. “Thank you, Tank. You’ll never know how much this means to me.”

I hold her and rub her back for a long moment before she composes herself once again. “All better?” I ask.

“Yes. Better than better. I can’t wait to go where I want without worrying about him catching me unawares.”

“Why don’t you try eating some of your fruit and drink the rest of your coffee while I go down for my meeting. I should be back in a couple of hours.”

“That sounds good. I might go back to sleep for an hour or so. This pregnancy is zapping all my energy.”

I make a mental not to get her to the doctor as soon as possible, then lean over, kiss her forehead, and say our goodbye. I loathe leaving her. Siege was right about how distracting love is. It literally changes everything. I would reorder my entire life to accommodate Ivy and our child.

By the time I make it back downstairs, the front room is starting to fill up with brothers eating breakfast. I fill myself a plate and sit down with Rider and Rigs, who has somehow managed to clean all the blood off his cut.

Rider gives me a feral grin. “Rigs was just telling me what an adventurous day you two had yesterday. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“We did what we had to do to get the job done. Personally, I’m glad it’s over.”

Rider asks, “You getting too old to track down criminals, or is your old lady keeping you worn out?”

“Fucking leave my old lady out of this.”

“Touchy,” he practically purrs. “That’s how you know she’s your one.”

“I know she’s my one because I threw my grandmother’s heirloom engagement ring on her finger. I wouldn’t normally part with that for anything.”

“Sounds like she’s already got you wrapped around her little finger. Not me. I love Frannie, but I’m still my own man. Ain’t nobody telling this biker what to do.”

I frown at his insistent crowing. “You still fishing mermaid shaped cereal out of the box for your little girl?”

“Fuck yeah. Just when we saved up enough mermaids to get the last bracelet, they started a new fucking promotion involving rings. I swear to God, I’m gonna be hunting down damn mermaids my whole fucking life.”

Rigs snorts a laugh. “It’s either that or just tell your little one no. They say no is a complete sentence.”

Rider looks thoroughly disgruntled. “She’s a talker, this kid of mine. Plus, she’s cute. It’s a deadly combination.”

“Well, your only other option is to burn that fucking cereal factory to the ground.”

“I wish life were that easy,” Rider laments. “I truly do.”

I truck my way through bacon, eggs, toast, and hash browns. There is no way in hell I’d be able to survive on muffins and shit. I guess my new wife doesn’t have to be a powerhouse. She has me to do the heavy lifting and fight all

her fights for her after all. Pride surges in my chest at the thought of being her protector. I was made for shit like this.

A slight shadow falls over my now empty plate and I looked up to find Loraine standing in front of me. She is dressed to capture a man's notice with a belly shirt that leaves nothing to the imagination, a short leather skirt, and spiked heels.

I sigh and press my lips together to give myself a minute to formulate a response that isn't mean. Loraine is doing the best can in life and doesn't deserve someone tearing away at her self-esteem.

"You're not supposed to be here, Lorie. Siege gave you a month-long ban. You aren't allowed on any club property," Riggs reminds her.

She tears up and stammers, "I know that. I just wanted to talk to Tank for a minute."

I take a deep breath and let out slowly. "Loraine, it's too early in the day to be dealing with you. We've got a meeting starting in a few minutes."

"I'm not trying to upset you or anything. I was hoping to talk to for a few minutes privately."

I wipe my hands on my napkin and put it down on my empty place before responding to her request. "I'm really sorry, Loraine. You need to understand that I'm married now. If I want to stay that way, I can't be meeting club vixens in private. Why don't you leave before Siege sees you and turns that month long ban into a permanent one?"

"I don't know what she's got that I don't. You've known me a long time. We were close at one time. How could you marry another woman without talking to me first?"

I'm bewildered by her gall and persistence. "You and I have never had an actual relationship. We've barely spoken for seven or eight months. You've never been to my house or even spent a full night with me here at the club. Why would you think I needed to talk to you about my personal life?"

She glances around before speaking, as if to gauge how many people are listening to our conversation. "I thought we

had something, but you weren't ready to settle down. I was giving you time to sow your wild oats. We were always meant to be together."

"Lorraine, what in the fuck are you doing here?" Siege asks from across the room.

She spins around, looking panicked at being caught. "I had to tell Tank something."

"No, you didn't. He's married now. Leave him the fuck alone. Go before I give you a permaban."

Thankfully, she turns and flees. I hate that she came here and made a fool of herself over me. We've talked about this at least a dozen times, but nothing ever changes with her. She has some kind of fixed delusion about us being together. It feels like when girls in grade school pick out a boy to be their boyfriend, only he doesn't know anything about it. It's annoying as fuck and I'm not risking my marriage over whatever shit is going on in her head.

Siege shouts that church is starting and we all stack our plates in a tub for the prospects to clean and head into the meeting room. We settle down rather quickly. Church is a solemn occasion. Being rowdy would be disrespectful to the club and the brotherhood.

Siege brings the meeting to order and asks Dutch to give report on the club's finances, since he's our treasurer. He walks us through our businesses, how much it's going to take to rectify the fire damage at the bar and such. He's good at painting a clear picture we can all understand.

Next up is Rider, our sergeant at arms. He talks about the Hellfire Hounds and how they've been slowly infringing on our territory. He also talks about the syndicate and how we have two of their thugs in lockdown.

That's when Siege calls on me, the vice president of the Savage Legion MC, to walk everyone through the situation with our hostages. I keep it short and sweet. "Rigs, Dutch, and I tracked down the two men who trashed our bar and set it on fire with our bartender inside. We discovered they're both

involved with the syndicate. We think one was abducted as a child and was upset that the other one set the bar on fire. He only signed up to tag our bar with graffiti. Since that's a low-level offense against the club and he's a victim of trafficking at an early age, I recommend that we get him out of our hair by sending him to the Vagabonds. They can keep an eye on him until he gets some treatment for all the trauma the syndicate put him through."

"Based on the information provided, I'm taking a vote," Siege says. All in favor of sending him to the east coast, say aye."

Most of the voices in the room say just that, a clear majority.

With that settled, I move on to Doug. "Most of you attended my wedding. What many don't know is the second hostage we have in lock up, the one who actually set fire to our property, is my wife's abusive ex. She reports a pattern of extensive abuse requiring medical intervention over a period of approximately five years. Every time she tried to leave, he'd force her back, she took out a protective order and that didn't stop the fucker. Setting the bar on fire was retaliation for Ivy choosing me instead of him. Siege and I talked to him yesterday evening. He was both remorseless and belligerent."

I look out at the sea of faces. My brothers are angry, disgusted with this man, and likely agree that he should be eliminated for the safety of all.

"I'm suggesting the ultimate penalty for this man, because if we release him, he'll continue to be a danger to others. Maybe the next time he sets our bar on fire, Mel won't get to the fire extinguisher in time. It could be the next time he gets his hands on Ivy, we never see her again."

Siege takes over here. "You've heard the information. Time to weigh in with your vote. Before you cast your vote, I want to remind you that we're talking about exacting the ultimate justice. If there is any doubt in your mind, do not support the current motion." Looking from one brother to another, he says

somberly, “All those in favor of administering the ultimate penalty, say aye.”

A lesser number speak up, so we count votes.

“All those not in favor of administering the ultimate penalty, say nay.”

Again, we count up votes. It’s seven for, six against. That means Doug’s days are numbered. Killing people is a dirty business, but, unfortunately, sometimes there’s no other way.

“The ayes have spoken,” Siege announces. “Douglas Sanders will receive the ultimate justice at the hands of our club. It will be meted out by club officers and is never spoken of again. Am I understood?”

Our club brothers sound off their agreement. A chill runs up my spine as I realize my club brothers and I just voted to take a man’s life like it was ours to take. Something doesn’t sit well with me about that. However, the prospect of letting him go is without a doubt crueler than permitting him a dignified death.

Chapter 21

Ivy

I wake up wondering where Tank got off to. I slide my hand over to his side of the bed but find no hint of warmth. That must mean he's been gone a while. I'm not all that surprised because I know he's a busy man, so I drag my pregnant self out of bed, grab a shower, and put on the clean clothes that have been laid out for me. Although Tank keeps a bag of his personal effects at the clubhouse, it has never occurred to me to do anything like that. I guess someone's looking out for me because the jeans and t-shirt fit like a glove, despite my widening waist.

I sling my purse over my shoulder and head downstairs to look for Tank. I bump into Mel instead.

She gives me a bright grin. "Morning, sunshine. Did you sleep well last night?"

I walk up to the bar and drop down on one of the many empty stools. "I sure did. Unfortunately, I have a doctor's appointment scheduled this morning, but Tank said I'm not allowed to go out on my own because it's not safe for me. You haven't seen him around, have you?"

"The brothers are all in church. Have been for hours."

My heart sinks. "I really need to go to this appointment. Is my car still here?"

"Probably," she says with a shrug.

"Maybe I should just go on my own. I'm sure everything will be fine if I drive straight there and straight back."

Mel thinks it over for a minute before her expression brightens. "I can get one of the prospects to accompany you."

I immediately perk up as well. "That would really be amazing. Tank told me at one time if he wasn't available, the prospects could go with me."

Mel pulls out her cell phone and types out a text. When she is finished, she shoves her phone back into her pocket. “Problem solved. Nick is on his way. You’ll like him. He’s quiet, minds his own business, and is always on the lookout for trouble. If you want, he can just follow you on his bike. That way you don’t have to try to make awkward conversation with a complete stranger in your car.”

I’m nodding before she even gets the sentence out. “I’m anxious enough about my appointment. I definitely don’t need to throw conversation with a total stranger on top of that.”

A large, muscle-bound man wearing a prospect cut walks into the room and makes beeline for the bar. I have to admit the man is handsome in his own way. All the men in the Savage Legion have a certain look about them, and Nick is no different.

“Are you the one needing an escort?” he asks gruffly.

“Yes,” I gush appreciatively. “If you have time and it’s not too much trouble, I have an appointment with my obstetrician.”

“That’s a baby doctor, right?”

I respond politely, “More like a doctor for women carrying babies.”

Mel joins the conversation now. “As you know, her old man is Tank, and he doesn’t feel comfortable with her being out and about on her own. He says she might be in danger.”

He shoves one hand through his hair anxiously. “Got it,” he says to Mel. “Don’t worry, I’m all over this.” Then he turns to me and asks, “What time is your appointment?”

“In forty minutes. And it takes thirty to get there.” I rub both hands over my baby bump and add sheepishly, “Sorry for the short notice.”

“Oh, aren’t you just about the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” Mel says.

“Pregnant women always are,” Nick grumbles. He pulls a pistol, checks the clip, and slides it back into his back holster.

“We’d best be going if we’re gonna get you there on time.”

We head out the door just as another prospect is pulling my car up to the front of the building. Nick jumps on his bike and revs his engine as I climb into the driver’s seat. Within moments we’re pulling onto the interstate.

Last night, Tank agreed to keep both me and my child. In fact, he was pretty adamant, and he said he thought of my child as his own already. The idea of living happily ever after with Tank in his beautiful home seems like a wonderful dream come true.

I love everything about this man, including the fact that he let me console him when he was out of sorts last night. Tank is definitely the right person for me.

I’m so deep in my own internal musings that I don’t see the danger until it’s too late. Tires screech in front of me and my adrenaline shoots through the roof when I realize a dark sedan is running me off the side of the road. I barely manage to keep from driving my car into a ditch.

That’s when I see that another SUV plow right into Nick. He’s hung up under their front bumper and struggling to get up. I immediately fumble with the door, trying to get out. I’ve got to get to him, alert whoever is driving the SUV that they’ve run into him, and get them to back up off of him. I can see they’re crushing one of his legs beneath his bike.

When he sees me running toward him, his eyes get big. Instead of reaching for me to help him, he starts screaming, “Run, Ivy. Get back in your car and get the hell out of here.”

What he’s saying doesn’t make sense. There’s been an accident, why would I leave him lying in the middle of the road injured? What he screams next helps me get my head in the game.

“They’re here for you, girl. Watch your back. He’s about to grab you!”

I turn just in time to see a man running after me. He’s got a determined expression on his face, and when I put on a burst

of speed, he does too.

I realize in an instant this is no accident. We've been run off the road intentionally by God only knows who. I put on another burst of speed to get away from the strange man running after me.

The closer I get to Nick, the more he panics. I hate to see him pinned to the ground that way and struggling. Only, when I get close, I realize he's not panicking. He's fighting to get the gun from the holster on the small of his back.

As I fall to my knees beside him, he manages to jerk his pistol free and squeeze out a few rounds at the man who had been chasing me. The guy dodges to the side, jumps over the guardrail, dashes into the brush, and manages to get away unscathed. Nick doesn't give up though. He keeps shooting at him until his clip runs dry. That's when both doors of the SUV swing open, and a man and a woman step out. My heart sinks when I realize it's the couple Cleo showed me on her phone. The couple that wants to adopt my baby, the ones who made a complaint about me to child protective services, calling me unfit. The Hendersons.

Nick whispers, "You gotta go, Ivy. You can't fucking save me, but you can save yourself."

When I hesitate for just a second, he states harshly, "Save yourself and save your baby."

I hate that he's right. There's nothing I can do for him. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm so fucking sorry, Nick."

I dart away as fast as I can and run back toward my vehicle. It's still blocked by the sedan, but I'll do what I have to do to get away, even ride the ditch.

I hear a single gunshot. Since Nick is out of bullets, that can only mean one thing. They shot him. Those bastards killed an innocent man. My eyes instinctively close for a second as I realize this man gave his life for me and my child.

Suddenly, an arm comes out of nowhere and slams into my throat, leaving me winded and gasping for breath. The pain is excruciating. Before I can figure out what's going on, a hand

grabs my hair roughly, and yanks my head back. I turn and see the guy who ran into the brush. He starts dragging me back to the van. Only the van has now backed up and is meeting us halfway. When we're close, the door slides open and the man inside reaches out to grab me roughly by the arm.

These men are taking me away from my new husband, away all my wonderful new friends, away from my whole life. I should be fighting back. Why am I not fighting back? I break through whatever paralysis that has gripped me and begin fighting like a wildcat. This is my one and only chance to get away. I can't let it slip by. I can't let Tank's club brother give his life for nothing. That thought spurs me to fight harder.

Something hard slams into the back of my head and my world starts to go dim.

The man catches me when I begin to fall forward. "Why in the hell did you do that? We need her alive and healthy."

"I don't give a shit whether she's alive and healthy. It actually works out better for me if she winds up dead."

The last words I hear are, "That wasn't our deal, Jamison."

Oh God, this man has the same last name as Tank, as me now that I'm married to him. Why?

Chapter 22

Tank

The club officers are still hashing out the details of how to deal with Doug when I get a call from Smoke. “Want to tell me why I just got a writ of habeas corpus for your lovely wife?”

“English, man. Speak English.”

“As you know, a group of your extended family have contested your grandfather’s will.”

“Lot of good it will do them now that I’m married.”

“In order to be considered married, you have to have more than a marriage license. You have to have an actual wife. They’ve petitioned the judge to have her present in court.”

I shake my head, totally bewildered by this latest turn of events. “I have no idea what those assholes are up to. My best guess is they’re just trying to be annoying little shits to make this last as long as they can.”

“Alright. I’ll respond by agreeing to a court date.”

A commotion around Siege draws my attention. “Okay. Catch you later, Smoke. Something’s going down here and I need to attend to it.”

I end the call, put my phone back in my pocket, and walk over to see what the freak out is about. I can hear Siege speaking rapidly on the phone.

“No, Doc, don’t leave him. If there’s any way to save his life, do it.”

There’s some more cryptic back and forth, then Siege ends the call. He turns to us and announces, “Nick was escorting Ivy to a doctor’s appointment. Someone ran them both off the road, shot Nick in the chest, and abducted Ivy.”

My world stops, and I fight to catch my breath. “What? Siege, what’s happened? Where—”

“That’s all I’ve got, Nick’s still alive but they took Ivy.”

“It’s got to be those syndicate assholes,” I say as I’m halfway to the door. “Doug’s gotta know something, those bastards branded him. He’ll know where they’ve taken Ivy.”

Rigs folds his arms over his chest. “I’ll talk to Doug. I’m better at wringing information out of shitheads like him. You talk to Mr. I Tried to Bite My Tongue Off. He might be willing to tell you about any meeting places or safehouses if you explain that they’ve taken your wife. If he gives up intel then that’s another brownie point for him, if he doesn’t then maybe we have to rethink the east coast relocation option.”

“Good plan,” Siege agrees. “Dutch can scope out the scene of the crime with Bane. He has police contacts that might share information discretely. Meanwhile, I’ll head to the hospital and try to get a word with Nick the moment he’s conscious.”

As we head downstairs, Rigs tries to reassure me. “They’re not gonna do anything to hurt Ivy. If it’s the syndicate, they want the baby, and she’s not far enough along to try to take out of her body yet.”

My blood runs cold at the image that presents in my mind. My gut is churning and I’m barely holding it together. I slam my fist into the concrete wall.

Rigs grabs me and stops me from doing it again. “Cut it out. We don’t have time for that shit. You gotta manage your emotions or you’ll be the one getting in your own way when trying to rescue her.”

“Yeah. I get that. I’m good, man.” That’s a fucking lie. I’m anything but good right now. In fact, not letting me near Doug is a good thing. I would probably rip him apart if he played any games with me.

We open the door leading to the holding area and see the door Franklin’s room standing open. I walk in as Rigs passes me to access Doug’s room.

Vapor is scrolling on his phone when I walk in. He looks up and grins. “I heard you coming all the way down the hall.”

“No time for bullshit. Ivy’s been abducted by the syndicate. I need to talk to Frank.”

Frank jerks up from his lying position, clearly not all the way asleep. He starts trying to speak. Doc told him to not talk for a few days to give his tongue a chance to heal so Vapor hands him a pad and pen while I explain.

“The syndicate ran my wife and one of our prospects off the road about an hour ago. They shot him in the chest and took her. We think it’s because she’s pregnant and was going to put her baby up for adoption before she married me. They’re clearly pissed that she changed her mind.”

Vapor asks, “Why the hell do they care so much about one pregnant woman?”

Frank scribbles something on the pad. *They might not know she got hitched.*

He quickly scribbles some more. *They target women and children who don’t have family.*

“So there’s no one that cares when they go missing, right?”

He nods grimly and points to himself, clearly indicating that was one such person.

“Where do they take the women they abduct?”

He looks scared, but forces himself to write, *They have a farm.*

“What the fuck do you mean by farm? Like cattle?”

Frank shakes his head vehemently and writes, *The farm’s for people. That’s where they keep pregnant women and kids.*

Vapor asks, “What the hell?”

Frank flips the page and starts scribbling again. *They lure desperate women, pregnant junkies, homeless women. They think it’s some shelter or rehab. They think they’re gonna give birth and walk with a payout, but the syndicate never lets them go. They get them working in their brothels, and if they get pregnant again, bingo—more babies.*

Vapor gasps. “It’s like a puppy mill for humans.”

Frank taps his chest, once again indicating that's how it was for him. They got him as a newborn or so young he can't remember anything else.

“How fucking many? How many have you seen?” My voice is deep and rough. I feel like I'm about to lose it again.

Frank writes, *I've seen seventeen, but I've only been to the farm once.*

“Where the fuck is it?”

Frank points to my phone and writes *map* on his pad. I open my map app and hand it to him. I wait for what seems like forever while he scrolls, zooms in and out, and types in a new location and does it all over again. Finally, there is a single blue pin dropped on the map in Nevada near the Utah state line. He mumbles one gurgled word. “There.”

“Tell me everything you can remember about this place.”

He begins writing again. *I was fourteen when I went there. The women were nice but desperate to get away.*

He pauses and his hand trembles as he tries to write. I can tell by the look on his face he's about to tear up. *I couldn't save them.*

I rest my hand on his shoulder in a soothing gesture. “No. Tell me everything you can remember about the layout of the farm. Where did they keep the women and how many guards did they have? Were they tagged or chained?”

He nods and gets to writing. *Farm was isolated. See the map. It's near a forest. Big farmhouse. Pregnant women upstairs, babies and young kids downstairs. Women trying to escape were locked in the basement. The guards inside were women. The guards outside were men. The outside guards monitored the property, chased down runaways, and transported them to and from the farm. I don't know about security, this was around ten years ago but they probably have cameras now. I was there with three other men to drop off a pregnant teen. She was excited because she didn't understand.*

“We need to track that farm down, rescue anyone who's being held there. Then burn the fucking place to the ground,”

Vapor says.

“Is this the only farm they have?”

Frank writes, *It's the only one I've ever heard of. They have different places for different things. Warehouse in the city for smuggling contraband, there's a ship docked off the coast, I don't know what that's used for, maybe people trafficking or weapons. They have a whole apartment building in LA for processing drugs.*

“One member of the syndicate said they are coast to coast. Is that true?”

Frank snorts and shakes his head. He scribbles, *No. That's the lie they tell newbies, they aren't that powerful. They were originally holy rollers out of Utah. When that state drove out the polygamists, they spread to Nevada and Arizona. They pushed into California a decade ago. Utah decriminalized polygamy again in 2020, so they're starting up there again.*

Vapor grumbles, “The filthy fuckers have got themselves a booming little cottage business going there.”

I sigh. “That's why you jumped at the chance to fall off the grid back east, right? The syndicate can't get to you there.”

Frank's face sobers instantly and he pens quickly, *They have what they call trackers. Hitmen who are paid bounty hunters. Getting away is difficult. If you run, they track you down and make an example of you.*

“Do I want to know what they do when they make an example of someone?”

Frank shakes his head. *They kill you in particularly gruesome ways, then make sure everyone in the organization sees it.*

“Is there anything else you can tell us that might help us clear out the farm?”

They use high tech surveillance and will be tracking you long before you make it to the farm. I'm guessing they probably tag the women now, ankle bracelets with chips or something like that.

“That’s good information. Anything else?”

I’m coming with you, he writes. The last I heard, my mom was still there.

“You sure about that? According to your information, she should have been sold long ago.”

She’s an experienced midwife. They need her too much to sell her.

I rub my chin, thinking over his request. “That’s not a good idea. You just got unhooked from your IV today.”

What do you care? I’m nobody to you.

“I don’t think you’re a nobody. That’s the syndicate talking, not you.”

I can help you, I’ve been there, he writes and then underlines several times.

“Fucking hell. Okay, if Siege doesn’t put a stop to it, you can come. I can tell you right now that he’s not gonna give you a weapon.”

I’ll fucking find my own weapon when I get there, he writes.

“Alright, then. Get ready and meet us upstairs as soon as you can. I’m gonna go over and see what Rigs got from Doug.”

When I walk into Doug’s cell, I can’t believe my eyes. The place is an absolute bloodbath. My old friend is sitting there, his hands folded, praying over Doug’s dead body. It looks like the idiot has been cut a hundred times all over his body before Rigs plunged the knife into his chest.

“Fucking hell, Rigs. What happened?”

“I...I cleansed him in the b-blood of Christ.”

“Oh shit.” He is in some kind of dissociative PTSD state. I’ve seen him do this before when he was triggered by something that reminded him of combat. Those times he hadn’t been violent, just sitting with his back to the wall zoned out.

Kicking the chair holding Doug's body back, I squat down and shove Rigs' hair out of his face. "Rigs, brother, talk to me. Are you okay?"

When he lifts his head and speaks, my blood runs cold.

"He knew. The fucker knew what they were going to do with Ivy. He said it was what she deserves for shitting on him after everything he's done for her. He didn't give a fuck about his own baby, he was happy for the sick bastards to—"

I hook a hand behind Rigs' neck and pull his head down until we're touching foreheads. I speak slowly so my oldest friend understands. "Putting a knife in his heart was the right fucking thing to do. I would have done the same. He was a soulless bastard and slated to die anyway."

Rigs nods slightly and pulls back. Looking down at his blood-stained hands, he says, "Why is always me who ends up sending these fuckers to meet their maker?"

I grab his arm and pull him up. "Because you're the strongest and the best of us. You drag evil from the dark corners of the world and destroy it. Nothing else is going on here so don't start second guessing yourself, okay, brother?"

He nods and begins wiping his hands on his jeans. "Let's head upstairs. You can grab a shower while I brief everyone on what we've learned."

"What did you learn?" he asks, barely turning to look at me.

"The syndicate is only operational in four states. They have a fucking farm where they hold women hostage. It's a lot more involved than that, but you need a time out and a shower before I dump the rest of it on you."

Without another word he walks upstairs like a ghost, his expression blank as can be.

I'm fucking terrified for my wife and worried as fuck about my friend. I hit Siege's office and find only Rider and Rage. I bring them up to speed and we type it all up in several bulky texts that get sent to our private encrypted group chat.

Zen, our IT guy, runs into the room holding his phone up. “Is all this fucking true? They have a fucking human farm?”

I nod, feeling agitated and hyped for a battle. “Yeah, it sure the fuck is, and they have my wife on route to the damn place right now.”

Rather than reading through all the text replies, I call Siege directly.

“Fucking hell, Tank,” he says when he picks up. “I can’t fucking believe what I’m reading right now.”

“Before you ask, boss, it’s all true. But that’s not all. Rigs zero dark thirtied our problem child during a ride on the merry-go-round.”

“What the fuck is going on with our club today?”

“There is an excellent explanation for that. I’ll tell you all about it when you get back. How’s Nick holding up?”

“Not so well. He just got out of surgery and is still under anesthesia. Looks like it will be some time before he’s able to talk to anyone.”

“How about you leave a couple of prospects to make sure no one circles back around for him, cos I’m pretty damn sure they’re going to. We need you here. I plan to head out to the farm within the next hour. You probably want to be here for that.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve got Sam and Roman here. I’ll alert them that there is going to be trouble so they can be on the lookout for it.”

Chapter 23

Ivy

I wake up with a pounding headache, unsure of my surroundings. I hear women's voices. Someone puts a wet cloth against the back of my head. It's only then that I realize I'm lying on my stomach. I try my best to lift my head but it hurts.

"Lay still, child. You've taken a nasty blow to the head and likely have a slight concussion."

Turning to look in her direction, I see an older woman with greying hair and a kind face. "Are you a doctor?"

"I'm a midwife. Unfortunately, I'm the closest thing to a doctor you're going to see anytime soon. My name is Mary Ann."

"Was I in an accident?"

Another female voice from across the room states bitterly, "You're the latest addition to Happy Farms."

Another person giggles.

The older woman beside me says, "Don't pay any attention to Angela. She has an odd sense of humor."

I manage to push myself up and turn around on the bed. Other than the midwife, I'm in a room with three women. It looks like a medical ward or something, but I'm clearly not in a hospital.

Looking around, I ask anxiously, "Seriously, where am I?"

I bring my hand up to touch the back of my head, only to find an egg-sized lump that's painful to the touch.

The older woman asks, "What's the last thing you remember?"

I squint my eyes, trying to remember. "I was driving to my doctor's appointment in Las Salinas, and something happened."

“Was there a man involved?”

My eyes widen as it all begins to slowly come back to me.

A small, mousy voice says, “I always hate this part. You know, when the memories come flooding back.”

Something about her saying that opens a floodgate in my mind. “Oh my God, my protector was killed and I was forced into a van.”

They all stay quiet as I begin to process what happened. I remember Nick being trapped, him telling me to run, and hearing the shot that killed him. My burning scalp is a brutal reminder that the stranger ran me down and dragged me to the van. The couple were the ones involved in the syndicate and the other’s name was Jamison. Since that can be a first name, maybe I’m jumping to conclusions thinking that he’s related to Tank. Still, it’s a huge coincidence if he’s not.

“Does anyone have some aspirin? I have a pounding headache.”

The snarky one from before says, “I’ll bet you do.”

The older woman responds irritably, “Oh, leave the poor woman alone, Angela. What do you get out of kicking people when they’re down?”

Angela shoots back, “Not a lot, actually. Just alleviation from endless boredom. I hope she’s not another junkie, I don’t want to be stuck in a room with a withdrawing addict.”

Mary Ann hands me two pills and a glass of water.

I gratefully wash them down with several gulps. “Thank you. I needed that.” Glancing at Mary Ann, I ask, “Are you all abducted, or just me?”

“All, I’m afraid,” she responds solemnly.

I look at the snarky woman, Angela and say, “Why would you think I’m a junkie?”

“That’s the usual type they pick up, pregnant junkies, homeless women, prostitutes. They tell you that it’s a rehab center, or a homeless shelter for pregnant women. That you get

food and board, and they'll find homes for your baby, whatever it takes to get you in the van and then—”

“Enough, Angela,” Mary Ann says. “She doesn’t need to know all that now, let her rest up first, she’ll be terrified.”

Surprisingly enough I’m not terrified, I don’t know if it’s the adrenaline kicking in or some mother’s protective instinct but instead, I’m pissed as hell. “it’s the syndicate, right?” I ask.

The older woman nods. “People call it different things. Syndicate, organization, association.”

“And this is their farm,” Angela added.

“Farm?” I ask, not immediately able to guess what that could mean and wondering why the syndicate would be interested in rearing animals.

Angela provides the answer. “You’re on a human breeding farm.”

I gasp in horror.

She nods, “They lure in pregnant women, women with no one. They offer you a place to live, medical care and help in finding a home for your baby. By the time you find out the truth it’s too late.”

I’m speechless that anything like this could be happening, but force myself to ask, “And then what, you stay here until you give birth?”

“No,” another woman says quietly. “They put you to work in their brothels.”

“When you’re pregnant?”

“Some men pay more for that,” the woman says. “They work you until you can’t work any more.”

“That’s where Mary Ann helps,” Angela adds. “She tries to protect us as much as she can, Gemma has high blood pressure, Beth’s just given birth.”

The quiet woman who I assume is Gemma nods, “She can’t help everyone, In this facility there’s maybe ten women at the moment, there are three rooms on this floor. This is the

medical ward for women who are sick or unable to work or have just given birth. The other rooms are for the women who are still working in the brothels.

I stare at this woman's hard face. "I'm sorry you ended up here. No one deserves to be treated like livestock."

She flashes me a weak grin. "Damn straight, new girl."

I rub both hands up and down my face, wishing this were somehow all just a bad dream. It just seems so unbelievable.

"How far along are you?" Mary Ann asks.

"I'm four months. You said you're a midwife, right?"

"Yes. The only one at this facility."

"How long have you been here?"

"Coming up on twenty years."

"Twenty years?" I say with disbelief, wondering why she didn't try to escape.

Her eyes clouded over.

"They have leverage over her," Gemma says.

"There is no way out, and those who try die." Mary Ann leans over and checks the back of my head where I got hit. I'd almost forgotten about that, and wince in pain.

"Sorry, it's a nasty looking scrape but I don't think they've done too much damage. But I'll tell the guards you've got a concussion and need two weeks observation."

"I'll not be here in two weeks," I say.

"There's no way to escape," Mary Ann repeats.

I lower my voice to a whisper. "Oh, I'm not trying to escape. I'm waiting on my Prince Charming to come rescue me."

Angela snorts a laugh. "Sounds like the concussion talking to me. Even if you had a prince charming, he'd never be able to get into this place it's locked down tighter than Fort Knox."

“My Prince Charming rides a motorcycle, was a tank driver in the military, and has about thirty club brothers. My best guess is he’ll be along very soon. When he comes for me, he’s not going to leave anyone behind. This is the day you all get rescued.” I hope I sound convincing to them.

“What exactly do you want us to do?” asks the quiet girl.

“All I want is to give him a helping hand, maybe by short circuiting the electrical system. That would bring down the security system, right?” I’d been trying to figure out what kind of security they had in the place. I had to believe what they said about people escaping was true so that must mean some kind of surveillance system with cameras.

Mary Ann gasps. “Girl, you are brazen. Don’t even say things like that. You have no idea what you’re doing, if they found out they’d kill you.”

I look at our midwife intently. “Would they though? If my baby is so precious to them, they wouldn’t harm me, I’m not far gone enough for them to simply cut it out.”

“These people are dangerous, you can’t be assuming anything. Just close your mouth and open your eyes and ears for the first month or so. Don’t say or do anything to make them think you’re going to do something stupid. Your life depends on your discretion. If you’re really serious about making a run for it, then wait until they send you to the brothel.”

I nod, even though I don’t intend to do follow her advice.

Angela is eyeing me with interest, though. Suddenly, she stands up and extends her hand to me. “You look like you’ve been bailing hay all morning. Come with me. I’ll show you the showers and get you some clean clothes to wear.”

When we step out into the hall, we run into a couple of older women wearing dark blue jumpsuits. Since they’ve got tasers on their hips, no one needs to tell me that they are our guards.

One of them walks up to us and asks irritably, “Why are you out of your room?”

Angela responds demurely, “I’m taking her down the hall to get cleaned up.”

“Fine,” the woman responds curtly. “Get her in, scrubbed up, and out again. You’ve got ten minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Angela murmurs as she drags me down the hall by one hand.

The minute we’re in the bathroom, she turns on the shower and jerks me close. “Tell me more about Prince Charming. Is that story for real? How can you be so sure he’ll come for you?”

“He’s the most stubborn man alive and nursing a hero complex as wide as the Grand Canyon. He probably won’t be more than a few hours behind me. Are you going to help me?”

“Yeah, if we can figure out a way. I want out of here more than I want my next breath.” She pauses for a second or two before adding, “I don’t want to die at a fucking breeding facility set up by a bunch of sick bastards.”

“I should warn you that my husband hates men who abuse women with the fire of a thousand suns. My best guess is that they’ll shoot first and ask questions later. The men here aren’t going to survive, and I can see them burning this house and all the outbuildings to the ground and salting the earth so they can never set up another facility here.”

“I love your husband already. If you ever want a sister wife, just let me know.”

“You had better be joking,” I grumble as I quickly take off my clothes and step into the shower.

“Possessive. I like that,” Angela quips.

I don’t know what to make of this place or these people. I get the other woman being terrified of being caught plotting an escape. I even get Angela going a little crazy being stuck in such an untenable situation.

I don’t even know how to start thinking about plotting my escape. There’s electricity obviously, what I don’t get is how we are going to bring down the power grid. A worry niggles in

the back of my mind that they might have generators for backup. We might risk our lives to take the security system offline, only for the backups to immediately kick in. Maybe the older woman is right, and I should just keep my head down for a few days?

I quickly wash up, dry off with the towel Angela hands me, and cram myself into the clothes she holds out to me.

“Who’s watching your baby?” I ask her, she doesn’t look obviously pregnant so I figure her baby must be in a creche or something.

Her hand rises and her fingers spread protectively over her stomach. “I’m pregnant, only nine weeks, but Mary Ann told them I’m bleeding and need rest. She didn’t want me going back to work so soon after the birth, but at six weeks they sent me to the brothel and four weeks later I got pregnant again. I will do anything to get out of here. They took my last baby. They’re not taking this one, so help me God.”

Shock rises hard and fast as I realize the full magnitude of what she’s saying.

As if reading my mind, she whispers, “You go to the brothel and breed or get you get sold. That’s how they make their money.”

Every time I think I’ve gotten my head around the syndicate’s human trafficking business, another level of depravity rises to the surface.

Angela shakes me by the shoulders. “Wipe that horrified look off your face. You don’t ever let the guards see you with anything other than a smile on your face. They leave you alone if they think you’re a clueless idiot thinking you’re going to be freed if you just get pregnant one more time.”

I nod, feeling sick to my stomach. When we approach the bathroom door, I blank out my expression. I can do this, I tell myself over and over again until I believe it. When she opens the door, I try to look pleasantly oblivious. We move back down the hall as the guard who spoke to us earlier checks something off on her clipboard.

Once we are back inside our room, Angela and I sit by the window. Mary Ann hands me a bottle of water. “Try to stay hydrated. Your baby needs it to develop properly.”

“Yes, ma’am. And thank you for the advice earlier.”

She looks at me strangely and runs her hands down the front of her smock. “Well, you’re welcome. I don’t like being here any more than anyone else. I’m just trying to keep everyone alive.”

“I understand,” I say as kindly as possible because I believe what she’s saying is true. She’s just trying to make the best of a bad situation. I can respect that.

When she wanders off, Angela whispers, “We could pour water in the fuse box.”

I see the other two women are listening with interested expressions on their faces. I wonder why they never tried to escape before, but maybe all it took was a newcomer? Either that, or this is how they get their entertainment, watching yet another poor woman have her dreams crushed and submit to whatever horror lies in wait for her.

The quiet woman comes closer, clutching her baby in her arms. “Unless there are exposed wires, I’m not sure that will do much. Mary Ann has alcohol in her medical kit. Maybe we could pour some of that into the fuse box and set it on fire.”

“That’s a good idea, Beth.” Angela’s excited voice is a little loud, but no one seems to be paying attention to us.

“What with?” I ask.

Beth tips her head to the far corner of the room. I can see a couple of candlesticks. “We sometimes get power cuts, the generators kick in, but they only power the security system. They let us have candles, there’s a lighter beside them.”

“They let you have a lighter?” I ask incredulously.

“What is there to burn here?” Angela answers.

“There’s smoke detectors, so if a fire starts in our room, then the fire doors lock automatically, the only thing burning is us,” Beth adds.

I smile and rub my belly so anyone who might be watching electronically will think we're talking about babies, though inside I'm horrified. Then I lean forward and pretend to take a sip from my water bottle. "I think that might work, and it should override the door locking system at least on this floor."

"That sounds like some top tier sabotage to me," Angela whispers.

"What sort of building are we in?" I ask, realizing I know nothing of where I'm being held.

"A farm, it literally is a farm." Beth says looking at me like I'm crazy.

"How old?"

"What is this, you thinking of listing it?" She rolls her eyes.

"No," I hiss back. "I'm an architecture student, depending on when the farm was built, that might give us an idea about the wiring structure." Okay, I know I'm jumping the gun, I'm not a student yet, but I've been reading the textbooks for weeks. Architecture isn't just about building pretty houses, but also the boring shit. Which I now realize is absolutely not boring shit, but shit that could get us free.

Beth nodded in understanding, "I don't know, it's not old. Maybe from the nineties?"

"In that case it'll have modern wiring, there might be separate breaker boxes for the different floors, but unless someone has done some custom re-wiring, then taking out the breaker boxes should shut down the electrics. Which gives us however much time until the backup generators kick in." I stand up and rub my back in that pregnant woman manner, just in case anyone is watching us.

"The breaker box for this floor is on the wall in the hallway, near the bathroom," Beth says.

"One of us could pretend to go to the bathroom while the others create a distraction. But we need something to pry the plate open with," I don't see anything in our immediate environment that could possibly get the job done.

Beth jostles her fidgety baby on her hip. If what Angela told me is true—and I don't doubt that it isn't—then they'd be taking her baby away from her soon. I guess that's why she's jumping on every chance of escape “I saw a claw hammer on the top bathroom shelf a while back, after Jo tried to han—” she stopped mid-sentence, and I could see tears forming in her eyes, “they had to replace the shower head after it tore off the wall, I guess someone forgot it. I can probably go to the restroom and smuggle it back in my baby's swaddling.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? It could be dangerous, aren't there cameras in there?” I ask.

She bounces her baby on her hip again and sighs. “My baby is almost six weeks. If I don't take a risk when I have a chance, I might lose her forever. I can do this. Trust me.”

“I'm pretty sure there's no cameras there, they've got us locked up so tight and as there are no windows they wouldn't bother. Plus, they think they've broken us,” Angela says.

I nod reluctantly. “Okay. If you get into trouble, we'll come running.”

Her eyes go wide. “Come running and do what exactly?”

“There are more of us than them. The only weapon they have is a stun gun, which they can only use on one of us at a time. Before I let them hurt you, we'll swarm them and hold out until the Savage Legion gets here.”

They both just stare at me. It takes me a minute to realize they have no idea what the Savage Legion is. “That's my husband's club. They're all badass bikers.”

Angela nods. “Alright, then. That's good enough for me. I'll get my hands on the alcohol from the medical kit.”

“I guess I'll keep everyone distracted in here and keep an eye out for my husband.”

“It's for the best. You've already had a trip to the restroom. If you go out again, it'll only arouse their suspicion.”

Beth heads out to get the hammer and Angela makes her way toward the medical cabinet.

Mary Ann abruptly drops down beside me, startling me. “I’ve been listening to your little plan. You’re about to get some people killed.”

“I’m not staying here. That’s the bottom line. I don’t know how you’ve all just let them manipulate you into staying for years. There are more of us than them. One good riot and it would be over.”

She puts her hand on my arm. “Child, you don’t know what you’re saying. The syndicate is everywhere. Every time someone manages to get away, they set the dogs on you. If you escape the dogs and make it to the road, they hunt you down there. If by some miracle you hitch a ride out of this area, they have professional bounty hunters that keep looking until they find you. When they find you, they kill you slowly and make us all look at what happens when someone bucks the system. You don’t have a prayer of making it out of this situation alive.”

Gemma shuffles forward and looks at Mary Ann like she’s asking permission for something, the older woman nods. “They took Mary Ann’s son twenty years ago, but because they knew how valuable she would be to them as a midwife they’ve kept him. In return for her working for them they promised her that he wouldn’t be sold on, they use him as muscle. I’m guessing he’s been told something similar, if he plays nicely then his mom lives. She used to see him every so often when he was a kid, but she last saw him over ten years ago. Every month they’ll show her a proof of life video just to make sure she doesn’t do anything silly.”

Mary Ann brushed her eyes, “It’s true, I can’t escape. But in the years I’ve been here I’ve seen what happens to women who try.”

“You seem very sure about that. I know that my husband’s club has two members of the syndicate in chains right now. They’ve killed others. If people on the outside are willing to fight for us, don’t you think we owe it to ourselves and them to fight for ourselves?”

She looks doubtful. “Are you one hundred percent sure your husband is coming for you?”

“I’d bet my life on it.” The determination in my voice surprises me.

“How about the lives of every woman in this room? Would you bet their lives as well?”

I swallow thickly and nod. “Yes. I would. When they come for me, they won’t leave one woman or child behind. I promise you they’ll keep you safe. They rescued another woman and found a safe place where the syndicate couldn’t get to her. If they can do it for her, they can do it for all of you.”

After a few tense minutes, Mary Ann takes a deep breath and says, “Okay, I’ll help you.”

“Thank you. You won’t regret this.”

She glances at the door and murmurs, “I hope so. Timing will be everything. You were picked up in Las Salinas?”

I nod.

“That’s a seven-hour drive from here. Assuming the police and ambulance got to the scene quickly and your husband was informed, then they should be four hours away. We wait until lights out. There will only be one guard on duty then. I’ll take you to the restroom, I’ll say you’re spotting blood and I need to wash you up and have a look at you—they won’t suspect me at all. The others can cause a distraction and when it starts you stand in front of me like you’re scared, and I’ll pry the pate up and pour the alcohol inside then light it.”

I grasp her arm and look her in the eye. “We can do this.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and pray that Tank doesn’t get injured trying to get to me. I don’t know why I’m so certain he’ll come for me, but I know all the way down to my bones that he will.

Chapter 24

Tank

Riding with the Iron Demons again feels right, since they were the allies who've helped us reclaim our club. Their club president, Stark, jerks his chin at me as he passes me on the road and I return the gesture.

Allied brothers keep showing up, and by the time we pull off the interstate at the mouth of the long, winding road to the farm, we're fifty-eight strong. It's close to midnight when Zen begins working with teams of men doing recon. They're looking for security cameras mounted in the trees along the road. They've identified two and slowly turned them slightly away from the road when the rest of them go dark.

Zen calls out, "Something's gone wrong. The whole security feed just went offline."

Rage is in the process of flying a drone overhead and zooms it directly to the farmhouse. "The whole place is dark. I think they just lost power."

"Or some helpful soul knocked out the electricity so they wouldn't see us coming," I say excitedly, in the few weeks I've known Ivy I've realized that she's got some serious smarts.

"Move out," Siege orders. "Get to the farmhouse as quick as you can. Everyone stick to the fucking plan. Remember what Frank said about ankle bracelets—check all the women for any tracking devices before we load them into the vans. We don't want any unexpected visitors."

The sound of fifty-eight motorcycles sounds like the sky has opened and the gods are fighting with thunder. It's deafening. Usually, I'd be thrilled to be on an important mission to save the lives of innocent women and children. That's the kind of shit that feeds my soul.

Tonight, I take no joy in it because I can't think of anything but getting to Ivy. The last several hours on the road have been

hell, what with the worrying about what they could be doing to her and if I would get to her fast enough. Once I get my hands on those bastards, I'm going to fucking kill them all and let God sort them out.

Frank is riding side by side with Siege, leading the way. He's as eager to get to his mom as I am to get to my wife. I really made a good judgement call by sparing his life and am fucking grateful my club backed me up on that.

We race down the dirt track and park in a huge semicircle around the front of the property. Everyone knows their place and we scramble into action. Our snipers make their way to higher ground, going for the outbuilding's rooftops and nearby trees. Zen managed to get some decent satellite images of the property, so we've got a pretty good idea of the layout and any possible escape routes they might use. The right and left flank break out to clear the barn and other outbuildings.

The front line, led by Siege, Dutch, Rider, Frank, Rigs, and me, presses toward the front door of the farmhouse. This is a delicate operation, so we've put our guns away. From here on out, we'll only use hand-to-hand combat to get through the guards. We don't like killing women, and can't take a chance of a stray bullet hitting an innocent person.

Before we can make it to the steps, two men come out the front door and begin shooting at us from the porch. One drops and then the other does shortly after thanks to the snipers. There's a split second of shock, and I have to remind myself that they work for the syndicate and were active in whatever depravity the sick fucks had going on here. These are hardened criminals and not worthy of my compassion or concern.

We come barreling through the front door one by one and disperse through the front room. I hear someone moving off to the right and rush forward with my hands up. It's a woman wearing a blue jumpsuit like the men who shot at us. She's got a taser in her hand and tries to take aim at me. I rush forward, rip the taser from her hands, and zip tie her hands behind her back and her ankles together. Then I add another zip tie to connect the two, leaving her bound like a prize calf at the rodeo.

I see movement on the steps leading upstairs and rush up right behind Siege and Frank. I can hear the others grappling with the other female guards in the kitchen area. It astonishes me how many guards are on shift in the middle of the night.

When we hit the top of the steps, we see a woman in blue all the way at the far end of the hallway. She's setting fire to the curtains at an open window before trying to jump out.

I don't know exactly where he got a gun from, but Frank puts a bullet in her head as Siege jerks a fire extinguisher off the wall and rushes to put out the fire before the whole house goes up in flames. I'm shocked that the guards were apparently trained to kill the women rather than allow them to escape, but given what goes on in here I shouldn't really be surprised.

Siege, Frank, and I begin kicking in doors and pulling women out into the hall. Siege is explaining to them that they are being rescued. Some are staring suspiciously at us. Others are weeping and a few are looking guardedly hopeful.

Someone calls Frank's name. I look in that direction to see an older woman with grey streaks in her hair, her eyes are wide and her face is lit up with joy. When he turns and catches a glimpse of her, his face lights up as well. They run to each other and he catches her up in his arms.

I get more nervous as I continue looking for the woman I love. She's got to fucking be here somewhere, because if she isn't, I'm going to lose my fucking mind. I'm already planning the violence I'm going to do to whatever guards are still alive if I don't find her here tonight.

I kick in the last door and find her huddling in the back of the room with three other women— one who's holding a baby. I rush to her side and begin looking her over. “Thank fucking God you're here. Are you okay? Did those bastards hurt you?”

“I'm okay. You can stop freaking out, babe.”

Hearing that reassures me. I fall to my knees and pull her into my arms. Glancing up at Ivy, I ask, “Are you sure you're

okay? Tell me they didn't hit you or anything like that, sweetness."

She tugs my head back to look me in the eye. "I'm fine. Really, I am. I knew you'd come for me. I just knew it."

"That power cut worked in our favor. Do you know anything about it?"

My woman smiles up at me, "We didn't know if it would work or how long before the back-up generators started. But I hoped it would buy us time, and if you were coming then—"

Shock fills my very soul. "What the fuck, sweetness. Of course I would come for you. You're my fucking wife and you're carrying my fucking daughter."

She tugs me up to my feet and says, "We don't know whether we're having a boy or girl, so don't jinx it."

I brush my hand over her baby bump. "I have a feeling we're having a girl. All my gut feelings pan out. You'll see."

She grins up at me tiredly. "It's been a long day, babe. Is the fighting done out there?"

"It fucking better be. We brought fifty-eight men."

"Is that going to be enough bikes to get us all out of here? Are babies even allowed on bikes?"

"Hell the fuck no, they are not. What kind of question is that?"

"You're cursing more than normal tonight."

"Well, in my defense, I'm worlds more stressed than usual."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but we need to get the hell outta here, now. It won't take the syndicate long to realize one of their primary money-making facilities has gone dark."

"Agreed, sweetness. We have vans on route. Seven of them, I think. We're splitting the women between our club and the Iron Demons. Stark is their club president. He's trustworthy. We served in the military together. We haven't figured out what to do with all of your new friends yet, but rest assured, they'll be kept safe."

She clings to me in a way that makes me think she doesn't feel particularly safe.

"Look, babe, those bastards can't get you right now because all the assholes are either dead or hog tied."

"Why would you hog tie them?" she asks, confused.

"Well, the female guards got hog tied because we didn't really want to kill women."

She grips my arm harder. "So, what are you going to do, just let them go?"

I bend down and swoop her up in my arms. "One problem at a time, princess. One problem at a time."

A woman standing nearby mutters, "Jesus Christ, he really is Prince Charming."

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Another of the women asks.

"Angela, Beth, Gemma, this is my husband, Tank," Ivy says, her voice full of pride. "I told you he'd set us free."

I give them a million-megawatt smile and then turn around and walk from the room with my wife tucked safely in my arms as Frank and his mom help lead the other women to freedom.

When we step out the front door into the pale moonlight, Ivy's amazed voice drifts to my ears. "You're really pleased with yourself, aren't you?"

"Yeap, I sure am. It's been a good night's work. You got any complaints, wife?"

She just shakes her head, a hint of a smile curving up her lips. "No, I really don't. I'm grateful to have you in my life and am loving on you pretty hard right now."

"That's what I like to hear," I murmur happily. "Are you ready to get the hell outta here?"

"Yes. I'd like to go home."

“Well, we have to travel in packs. So, let’s see who we can round up.”

Frank pops up outta nowhere, his speech is still slurred, but I can just about understand what he’s saying. “My mom and me are ready to hit the road. I’ve seen Bane, Talon, Rage, and Vapor with women on the backs of their bikes.”

“Tell them we’re heading out if they want to come.”

Within fifteen minutes we’re all loaded up and ready to go. Having Ivy on the back of my bike again and flying down the interstate feels like true freedom after being in that nightmare farm where she and all those other women were being held hostage. With the cool night breeze whipping through my clothing, it seems like everything wrong has righted itself. After coming so close to Ivy ending up being a breeding slave for a criminal enterprise, I’ll never take my eyes off her again.

As we ride, a bike whizzes past us with her friend who called me Prince Charming on the back. Her long red hair is blowing in the breeze and she’s grinning from ear to ear. It’s moments like this that I know why Cleo works for social services. There is no feeling in the world quite like helping other people to safety.

Chapter 25

Ivy

I wake up with two-hundred and fifty pounds of muscle-bound biker curled protectively around my much smaller form. I don't even consider getting up. Being snuggled up with my new husband is too cozy. Instead, I stare out the window of our bedroom at the rising sun, as images of last night march through my mind.

I still can't believe that I was driving down the road one minute and being pulled into that van the next. Just the memory of the expression on Mr. Henderson's face as he reached for me chills me to the bone. I had something he wanted, and he was determined to take it from me.

Still, he wouldn't have been able to get his hands on me if it hadn't been for the stranger slamming what I now believe to be a rock into the back of my head and dragging me over to the van. The stranger is a blur in my mind because I only caught glimpses of him over my shoulder as he was chasing me. It really bothers me that I could walk right past him on the street and likely wouldn't even recognize his face.

I move my body back slightly and snuggle closer to Tank in a sad attempt to drive the terrifying images from my mind. His big arm slowly draws me close until my entire back is pressed against his chest.

"You okay this morning, princess?" Tank asks groggily.

"Not really," I respond quietly. "The people who abducted me and killed Nick got off scot-free. How do I know they're not gonna come after me again?"

He turns me over in his arms so we're face to face and tucks my hair behind my ear. "First of all, Nick isn't dead. That fucker is like a cat. He's got nine lives."

I jerk up to a sitting position, shocked by what he's telling me. "I saw him, bloodied and pinned under the front of their

vehicle. I was within earshot when they put a bullet in his chest. I don't see how anybody could have survived that."

"Yeah, me either. Apparently, Doc got to the scene before the EMS even arrived. Saved Nick's life. The bottom line is he not only survived, he's already bitching about when they're gonna release him from the hospital."

I grab Tank's arm and give it a squeeze. "He's not ready to be discharged. I mean he can't possibly be, right?"

Tank hauls his big body up to a sitting position and gives me a lopsided grin. "The man's got more stitches than Frankenstein's monster, is barely stable, and still in ICU. Trust me, he ain't going nowhere anytime soon."

"I want to visit him as soon as possible," I insist.

"We can arrange that. I'm all kinds of grateful to Nick as well. That's why I plan to recommend him for full membership the minute he gets released from the hospital."

My shoulders relax a little. "Thank you, Tank. I know he'll appreciate that."

"Nick is a good man. He's proven that time and time again. It's time for him to be patched. He deserves it."

I nod my head in agreement.

"As for those fuckers who abducted you, their asses are sitting in jail," Tank informs me.

"Brent and Liza Henderson are really in jail? How did you know it was them?"

"They ran you down on the highway right before you get to a blind curve. It's one of the three spots on that stretch of highway with the highest incidents of motor vehicle accidents. Las Salinas set up traffic cams at all three points last year. Siege told me almost everything was caught on the video feed, including them shooting Nick and abducting you."

"How about the stranger who hit me in the back of the head? Did they get him?"

Tank grimaces. “I heard the Hendersons had some flunky helping them out. The police haven’t found him yet, but Zenis trying facial recognition software to identify him.”

“He was really weird. Brent got mad at him when he slammed that rock into the back of my head, and reminded the man that he wasn’t supposed to harm me. They guy said he didn’t give a shit about me and that for his purposes it would be better if I was dead.”

Tanks had snaps up and anger lights up his expression. “What the hell? I understand that when you’re planning to break the law, sometimes you can’t be choosy about the hired help, but that’s absolute bullshit.”

I pause, wondering whether I should say what’s been troubling me. I decide I can’t keep it to myself. “Brent called him Jamison. Don’t you think it’s a coincidence?”

Tank jerks forward on the bed, leaning closer to me. “Let me get this straight. The guy who collaborated with traffickers, hit you in the head with a fucking rock, and said for his purposes it would be better if you were dead was named Jamison? Is that what I’m hearing you say, sweetness?”

“Yes.”

“Because right before we found out that Nick had been shot and you’d been abducted, Smoke informed me that my family had filed a writ of habeas corpus.”

I wrinkle my nose as I try to figure out what that means.

Seeing my look of confusion, Tank explains, “It was their way of saying they didn’t believe I had a wife and were putting the responsibility on me to prove it by presenting you in court.”

“They thought your marriage certificate was counterfeit?”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it. I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but it sounds like one of my asshole family members was hell bent on getting rid of you.”

“Possibly, but your family isn’t involved with the syndicate.”

“No, but neither was Doug until they caught up with him and decided they had a use for him. If the syndicate have been asking around about you, then they might have been checking out me too, and I wouldn’t put it past one of my lowlife relatives to take the bait, if there was something in it for them.”

Jumping out of bed, he begins pulling on a fresh pair of jeans and t-shirt. “I want to see what that traffic cam picked up with my own eyes. If any of my family members were involved in this, I’ll fucking give them a dirt nap so quick it’ll make their head spin.”

I climb out of bed and start getting dressed. I know there’s no stopping Tank when he gets like this. It’s also bugging me that I can’t remember the guy’s face clearly. I want to look at that footage as well.

We ride to the clubhouse, grab some coffee, and head to Siege’s office. When he motions us in, we sit in front of his neatly organized desk. I catch sight of Rigs leaning against wall and Dutch on seat across the room. They all look exhausted. Their IT guy is sitting beside him, pecking away on his laptop.

“Morning folks. Hope you slept well.” There is an edge of annoyance to Siege’s tone that makes me feel like I’ve done something wrong.

Tank ignores his irritation and comments dryly, “I’m surprised to see you up so early, especially after staying behind to supervise the extraction of all those women.”

Siege frowns at him. “I’m not fucking up early. I haven’t gone to bed yet. We’re still tracking down that third person who helped the Henderson’s abduct your wife. Glad you could join us.”

“Don’t get pissy with me. I had a traumatized old lady to deal with.”

“Sorry, I’m still aggravated about finding a fucking breeding farm tucked away in the middle of nowhere. I

fucking hate the syndicate. It was my distinct pleasure to burn that fucking place to the ground last night.”

“Ivy gave me some new information this morning that might help us find the stranger who got away.”

I clear my throat and begin telling them everything I told Tank earlier. “The one you’re looking for hit me in the back of the head with what felt like a rock. Brent told him that he wasn’t supposed to harm me because they needed me healthy. They guy said he didn’t care about me, and it would be better for his purposes if I was dead.”

Siege slowly sits up in his seat. “It’s almost like their hired gun didn’t understand the mission.”

“I don’t think he was a hired gun. I think he was a collaborator of some sort. Henderson called him Jamison.”

“Jamison, as in Tank’s family name?” Riggs asks.

“Could you have misheard?” Dutch says.

Tank shoots his club brother an irritated look. “My wife knows what she heard.”

“Yeah, but a lot went down.”

“It’s possible I misunderstood, but I don’t think so,” I insist.

“My family accused me of forging a marriage license and asked that I present Ivy in court to prove she’s real,” Tank explains.

“Or they wanted that because they knew she’d been abducted, and Tank would be unable to comply with the court order.” Siege says, catching on.

“Yeah. I came in today hoping to get a look at the traffic cam footage,” Tank says.

The guy on the laptop says, “I’m putting it up on the big screen now.”

Siege grabs the remote and turns on the TV mounted on the wall above his desk.

I watch in horror as my own abduction plays out in front of me. I focus on the stranger, watching as he hits me on the back of the head when I begin fighting them off.

Tank turns to look at me, his eyes filled with admiration. “Holy fucking shit. You did a good job, wife.”

Siege’s expression brightens. “She tried to save Nick and only left him when he made her. That’s fucking compassion and loyalty right there. You’ve got yourself one hell of a good old lady, Tank.”

I feel myself tearing up. “I’m so sorry he almost got killed protecting me.”

Dutch snorts a laugh. “Don’t fucking spill any tears over that tough fucker. He’s already trying to show off all his new scars.”

Riggs nods. “Yeah, he even wanted to open the bandage on his chest so I could see his new bullet wound. but the nurses wouldn’t let him.”

The guy with the computer adds, “Everyone’s calling him Ghost now because of all the close calls he’s had over the years. How fucking cool is that?”

“Very cool, but let’s get back to the matter at hand. Zen, enlarge the asshole’s face. Let’s see if Tank can recognize one of his own,” Siege says.

Zen zeros in on the face and jumps from frame to frame, trying to capture a clear image.”

Suddenly, Tank shouts, “Freeze frame.”

When the image stops moving, a chill creeps up my spine to see the face displayed clearly on the screen. It matches the blurry image in my mind of looking over my shoulder and seeing him chasing after me.

Tank’s voice is absolutely disgusted when he finally speaks. “Yeah, I know the little shit. He’s my fucking nephew, the disinherited one. His name is Chad Jamison. I can call up his old man right now.”

The traffic cam footage blinks out and the big screen goes dark, “No. Don’t call anyone yet. I’m going to do a deep web search for Chad. If I can figure out who his phone carrier is, I might be able to trace his phone,” Zen says.

Siege nods, “We don’t know how deep he’s involved yet. We don’t want to risk tipping him off.”

The brothers keep chatting about Chad. Tank wants him six feet under, but Siege wants him in prison where a softie like him will live just long enough to regret ever laying a hand on one of the women associated with their club.

“Do Chad and his family live in Santa Barbara?” Zen asks after a few minutes.

Tank answers, “Yeah, they sure the fuck do. Did you get a hit on them?”

“Chadlington Warton Jamison, son of Edward and Susan Jamison. Siblings, Ronald, Sebastian, and Priscilla Jamison.”

“That’s him,” Tank replies.

Riggs weedless him. “With names like Rostein and Chadlington, your family sound like a bunch of pretentious little snots.”

Instead of being offended, Tank just laughs. “You ain’t wrong about that, brother. Why in the hell do you think I stopped associating with the stupid bastards? Even my grandfather couldn’t stand them.”

Rigs slaps him on the shoulder. “You’re better off with us, brother. Trust me on that.”

Suddenly, Zen chuckles.

Siege asks, “Did you find him?”

“He’s sitting around two hundred yards from Tanks home.”

Tank swears under his breath. “The stupid fucker is casing my house? I swear that I’m going to wring his neck.”

“Do you reckon he knows what went down at the Farm?” Siege asks.

Tank shrugs.

“I’ll get Bane to call his police contact. They can pick him up for trespassing and then match him up with the footage from the abduction. It’s the shortest distance between two points and I’m too tired to deal with him.”

Rigs stretches his arms over his head. “You ain’t kidding about that, boss. I’m getting too old to be pulling all-nighters.”

When Siege starts pecking out a text on his phone, Tank goes off. “I can’t believe you’re having him picked up by the fucking police before I’ve had a chance to get my hands on the bastard.”

“If you or I were to get our hands on the little pipsqueak, we wouldn’t stop beating on him until he wasn’t breathing anymore,” Rigs says. “We’ve killed enough people in the last twenty-four hours. We don’t need to add one more soul to the list, don’t worry he won’t last long in jail.”

Everyone murmurs their agreement except Tank. All he does is grumble. “Fine. Take away my one fucking moment of joy, but don’t expect me to be happy about it.”

“Do you have binoculars here, Siege?” I ask, coming up with something that might assuage my husband.

“Military issue.” Siege says with a grin, cottoning on to what I’m thinking.

“Maybe if we hurry, we can watch the police arrest him. It’ll be fun to see how shocked he is.”

Tank stands up. “He’d be a lot more surprised if I punched him in the fucking face. But sure, I’ll accept your consolation prize.”

I smile up at him as he tugs me up from the chair. “If we’re lucky, we’ll have time to pop popcorn and pick a good vantage point.”

Tank stuffs his hand in his pocket and sticks out his elbow for me to loop my hand through. “Alright, sweetness. We’ll do this your way.”

I wave at his friends as we walk out of Siege's office and I talk about all the pros of his nephew ending up in jail. "I hear the food's terrible in jail, the temperature isn't always comfortable, and sometimes they have to shower in cold water. That might not sound too bad, but imagine going through that day after day for years. That's got to wear on a person's nerves."

"Don't forget the part about how he's going to end up with a boyfriend whether he wants one or not," Tank says.

"I don't think that's a real thing. It's just something that happens in the movies."

"Good God, woman. You're naïve. Exactly who do you think all those prisoners are having sex with?"

I shrug carelessly. "Probably themselves. I doubt they spend enough time together to form lasting relationships, especially not ones that end up turning romantic."

Tank just shakes his head and changes the subject.

I don't know who Siege called, but it takes the police forever to get to our place. Zen's intel put him at the end of the street, so we approached the house offroad and entered through the side garage entrance.

Tank wasn't sure what Chad was watching out for, maybe to check that I wasn't there? There was also that worrying thought that maybe he'd gotten word I had escaped and was more involved in the syndicate than we thought. I guess the police would get to the bottom of it all. Tank and I take turns looking through binoculars as they pull Chad out of his fancy sports car and handcuff his hands behind his back. After the way he manhandled me, watching him panic and eventually start crying is gratifying.

"This is world's better than beating him up," I murmur to Tank.

"Says you," he grumbles. "I would have loved to punch him in the face of a few times before the police got here."

“We gotta keep him pretty if you want him to get noticed on the inside.”

Tank throws back his head and laughs. After everything we’ve been through, hearing his light-hearted laughter hits me right in the feels. I hand the binoculars back to him and grab a handful of popcorn. As I’m cramming the last of it in my mouth, Tank jumps to his feet.

“He peed his pants.” Holding out the binoculars he asks, “Want to see?”

I shake my head, disgusted at the thought. “I’ll pass. Enjoy the view for both of us.”

“Too late. The show is over. They’re putting him into the cruiser.”

“And thankfully you got that on your security feed. So you can enjoy it for years to come.”

His expression suddenly turns devious. “I think I’m gonna send a copy to his parents. They need to know what an absolute little shit their son is.”

Rubbing my round belly with both hands, I say, “What if they’re involved?”

“Zen will do a thorough check, and so will the police. I’m pretty sure my despicable family wouldn’t stoop that low.” Tank says putting the binoculars down.

Now that the last of the men responsible for my abduction is in handcuffs, Tank’s mood has brightened. He leans over and gives my belly a kiss. “Our little girl is going to be made of sugar and spice and all things nice. Just wait and see.”

“She might be a he. And he might be made of slugs and snails and puppy dog tails.”

“It’s a she,” he responds, sounding more sure than I am about the gender of our child.

“I don’t care whether our child is a girl or a boy, just as long as they’re healthy.”

“Amen to that,” Tank says as he pulls me close for a kiss.

Epilogue

Five Years Later

Ivy

Tank can barely control his temper with the nurses. “We’ve been here seven hours and there’s no baby. Where the hell is my child?”

Doc makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “You’re acting like this is your first kid. You know these things take time.”

“Daughter one came after nine hours of labor. Daughter number two came after five hours of labor. Here we are with daughter number three and it’s taking in excess of seven hours. Delivery times are supposed to go down, right?”

Doc shoots him an indulgent look. “You lose your shit every single time your old lady gives birth. When are you going to learn?”

The nurse changing out my IV bag addresses his question. “It’s actually not true that labor and delivery times decrease with each succeeding birth. Babies are born when they want to get born.”

I grip Tank’s arm hard and grit out, “He knows that. Doc’s told him a thousand times.”

I smile at Doc, he’s an obstetrician by training who was patched into the Savage Legion after meeting Siege at one of Cleo’s antenatal appointments. He’s retired from medicine now but still helps out with any MC medical emergencies. He delivered my first two daughters and there’s no way I want to deliver my third baby without him present—even if he’s just here in a support role this time.

Tank shoots Doc an arrogant look. “It doesn’t matter what the old man says. It should take less time for each birth. Science supports my view.”

The nurse snorts a laugh. “Glory be, you’re just talking to keep from jumpin’ outta your skin, aren’t you?”

Tank pries my death grip off his arm and holds my hand in his. Without looking at the nurse, he states indignantly, “I’m in perfect control.”

“And you’re combat ready at all times, right, babe?”

Leaning down, he stares into my face. “Why is it between contractions you’re cracking jokes and acting like nothing is wrong. You are in the process of pushing out a fuckin’ baby. That means you take deep breaths between contractions and leave all the humor to me.”

“You’ve done this enough times, I’m not pushing out anything right now. I’m still only seven centimeters dilated,” I say, gritting my teeth through another contraction.

“Eight,” Doc calls back.

“I’m still confused about why you chose a retired doctor to be your secondary support person today,” the nurse says.

“I didn’t. Doc’s my primary support person. My husband is just the entertainment.”

Tank growls in the back of his throat. “You are not funny, sweetness. You look as though you should be, but you’re not.”

She chuckles at our inane banter, but Tank is getting hot under the collar. His free hand moves up to rub my back, I can feel his fingers running over the spot where my tattoo is. Tank inked me six months after our first child was born and added extra details after the birth of our second. It’ll soon be updated to add details commemorating this one as well.

“Relax Tank, it won’t be long before little Rosteina makes her entrance.”

I finally get the smile I’ve been hoping for and it’s like a blast of pure happiness right through my chest. We’d been joking about all the crazy names his family chose, she absolutely was not getting called that—or Tankina. Just then another contraction hits. I grip his hand hard and let out a little squeal of pain.

Doc pops his head up. “Best get Jimmy in. She’s almost fully dilated,” he calls to the nurse.

Suddenly, the door swings open and Dr. Jenkins walks in with two gloved hands held up in front of him. He’s wearing paper scrubs and a surgical mask. “I hear you’re dilating fast.”

Before we can answer, Doc says, “Good to see you, Jim. She’s at ten centimeters now.”

“Great to hear Josh. If you could bounce over, it would be greatly appreciated, you’re not covered by the hospital’s indemnity policy now you’re officially retired.

Doc gives up his seat reluctantly.

Dr. Jenkins chuckles. “You taught me everything I know old man, don’t take it personally.”

Doc shoots the other man, who’s not much younger than him, a death glare, but doesn’t say a word. I guess when you’ve been hands-on your entire working life it’s hard to take a back seat.

“You hanging in there, Ivy? Tell me what you need and I’ll get it,” Doc smiles as he squeezes my hand.

I whisper, “I think I need to push.”

This is the moment of truth. Tank is always afraid to look until we hear that first cry. It takes less than a minute and then our daughter is screaming her lungs out. Tank and I are looking at one another and can see the relief on each other’s faces.

“My daughter has a healthy set of lungs,” Tank brags.

I smiled tiredly at him. “You say that every time.”

“And, thankfully, every time it’s true.” He leans down to give me a quick kiss on the lips. “You did good, like always.”

The nurse walks up with our daughter in her arms and hands her off to Tank, who immediately pulls back my sheet and lays her on my naked chest. “I think this one’s the pick of the litter.”

“Don’t say that in front of the other two. You know how they get.”

Tank strokes his hand down our newborn daughter’s head. “You worry too much. They’re both little divas because I tell each of them they’re my favorite when the other one isn’t around.”

I gasp. I’m not shocked that he’s telling each of them they’re his favorite. That’s typical Tank behavior. What I’m shocked about is that he’s getting away with it without them figuring it out, my daughters inherited my smarts. “Tell me you don’t do that.”

He shrugs. “It puts smiles on their faces.”

“You’re playing with fire and you know it. They’re gonna figure out your game one day, and when they do, you’re gonna be the one to handle the epic meltdown.”

We cuddle our newborn, counting all her fingers and toes. Her hands are so tiny. Precious is the word that comes to mind when I look at her.

After a few minutes, Doc brings Tia and Tonya in. They’re both wearing tutus and tiaras. Each has a magic wand in her hand. They wanted to greet their new sister as fairy godmothers.

Tanks puts one of them on either side of me. The wonderous looks on their little faces fills my heart with joy.

Tonya asks, “When can she come home?”

Tia hurries to answer the question. Being the oldest, she likes to think she has all the answers. “The doctors keep the babies overnight. If they look like they’re supposed to and can breathe, they get to go home, and if not, they have to stay.”

When Tonya looks up at me, I nod. “Your sister’s exactly right.”

“I want her to come home now,” Tia insists.

Tank steps in. “We can’t rush babies. They’re ready when they’re ready. What do you two think of your sister?”

Tia softly runs one finger around the shell of the baby's ear. "She's pretty, like us."

When I start getting sleepy, Doc takes the kids again so I can finally get some rest. Every time I'm in the hospital, Tank refuses to leave my side, and this time is no different. I scooch over and make room for him in the bed. He barely squeezes his big body onto the edge so he can curl around me.

As I drift into a mindless slumber, my heart is filled with happiness. It's been years since Tank chased away all my demons and made all my dreams come true. Our lives are full of laughter, love, and family. I wouldn't trade what I have for anything in the whole world. I've been living my happily ever after for the last five years and I'm as blissfully happy today as I was the first year we got married. I hope what I have never ends and I plan to do whatever it takes to ensure that our lives keep rolling in the right direction.

Tank's arm tightens around me. "Time to stop thinking so much and sleep, my pretty wife."

I snuggle closer and close my eyes. I put in a hard day's work and deserve a nice rest in my husband's loving arms.

THE END

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About the Author

Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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