



# Goose's Wren

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** Wren never planned on coming back to White Summer—or crossing paths with Goose again. But when her toxic boyfriend turns violent, she finds herself with nowhere to go. Goose never expected to see Wren at the club's bike shop, but when he catches her hiding bruises, walking away isn't an option. Offering her a place to stay should be simple, but keeping his hands off her? Damn near impossible. When her ex comes back, high on meth and out for blood, Goose and his club won't hesitate. He saved her once. Now? She's his.

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Wren

I ride through WhiteSummer slowly, the familiar streets feeling both comforting and suffocating at the same time. I still remember the day I jumped onto my bike and left this place without a backwards glance. Now here I am hoping that things can be different.

My old bike sputters beneath me, fighting for every inch of pavement, refusing to accelerate beyond ten miles per hour. I grip the handlebars tightly, urging it forward as I make my way toward the shop owned by the Wolfsbane Motorcycle club.

The town hasn't changed much. Same dusty roads and same old buildings. The coffee shop on the corner still has that faded sign, the gas station still has those flickering neon lights that never fully turn off. Everything looks just as it did the day I left it. Everything except for me.

I never thought I'd come back here.

But after we lost our last apartment in Los Angeles, I managed to convince Tim that moving here was our best option. We'd been running out of places to go, burning through what little money we had. I told him we could start over here, that it'd be different. That he'd be different.

I sneaked out before he woke up this morning, knowing full well that if he caught me, he'd lose his damn mind. He didn't want me bringing the bike in to get fixed. Said it

was a waste of time and money. As if it was his money to begin with.

I couldn't just let my bike sit there, rusting away. Besides, this bike? It was mine. The one thing in my life that felt like freedom, and I wasn't going to let him take that from me, too.

So I keep going, ignoring the sting in my ribs as the cold morning air bites through my jacket. I tell myself the ache is just from sleeping on that too-thin mattress in that too-small trailer and not from the fight last night. Not from the hands of a man who is supposed to love me.

The bike coughs, lurches forward, and I give it a soft pat, whispering to it as if it were a living thing, "Come on, girl, just a little further."

Up ahead, I see the shop coming into view. And just like that, my stomach knots. I used to know several of the men in the club. Some of the women who are now married into it too.

Pulling up, I coax my bike to a stop, ignoring the way it groans like it's taking its final breath. The scent of motor oil and metal fills the air, stirring something deep in my chest. It's been years since I was here, since I was anywhere near these guys.

The bay door is wide open, the sound of classic rock spilling out along with the heavy clank of tools. The moment my engine cuts off, I see movement in the shadows of the garage. A handful of men step out into the bright sunlight, their leather cuts catching the light, the patches stitched on them unmistakable.

My stomach tightens, but I keep my face neutral, scanning the familiar faces in front of me.

I remember them from when I was younger—when I used to lurk in the background

while Sparrow wrapped herself around Goose, soaking up the club life like it was her birthright.

But now?I'm the only one standing here.

Torque is the first to approach, his brow furrowing as he takes me in.

"Need some help?"he asks, voice rough, deep.

I open my mouth, ready to answer, but the way his eyes narrow slightly, his head tilting like he's searching through old memories, makes me pause.I wait, watching as the recognition slowly dawns on him.

It takes several long seconds before his eyes widen just slightly behind those sunglasses he's always worn to hide those mesmerizing eyes.

"Holy shit," he mutters, then his lips curl into something between a grin and a smirk."Wren?"

I huff out a quiet laugh and nod."Took you long enough."

He barks out a laugh, nudging Wrench with his elbow."You see this?Sparrow's little sister ain't so little anymore."

Wrench glances up from wiping grease off his hands and gives me a once-over, nodding in recognition."Damn.You grew up."

"Yeah, well," I say, swinging my leg off my bike, "time has a way of doing that."

I force myself to stay relaxed, but my pulse is hammering.Because if these guys are here, then there's a damn good chance he is too.

As if thinking about him was enough to pull him out of thin air, Goose steps out from the bay doors.

The moment I see him, it's like the air shifts around me. He hasn't changed much, if anything, he's even more solid, more intense. The years have added more muscle to his frame, more definition to his sharp jawline. His dark blond hair is a little longer than I remember, curling slightly at the ends, and there's a shadow of scruff along his jaw.

But it's his eyes that hit me the hardest.

## Page 2

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They find me instantly, and for a brief moment, there's a flicker of something, before it vanishes beneath a wall of ice. His entire body goes rigid, shoulders squaring like he's bracing for a hit. His jaw tightens, and those deep, stormy eyes go hard, unreadable.

Shit.

I knew this moment was coming, but I didn't expect it to feel like this. You'd think with the way he's acting, I had something to do with what went wrong between him and Sparrow. Sparrow's bullshit was always causing me problems. Why should now be any different?

I don't know what I thought would happen. Maybe he'd brush me off, act indifferent, treat me like some random customer. But this? This silent, heavy tension that coils in the air between us like a snake ready to strike? It's worse.

Goose drags his gaze from me to my bike, his eyes scanning over it like he's looking for a reason to ignore my presence altogether. When he speaks, his voice is gravelly and short.

"What's wrong with it?"

I blink, caught off guard by the way he doesn't say my name at all. Doesn't ask why I'm here. Just straight to business.

Torque, sensing the tension, clears his throat. "Looks like her old bike's about ready to give up the ghost."

Goose doesn't look at Torque. Doesn't look at me either.

"How long's it been stalling?"

I cross my arms, ignoring the way my stomach twists. "A while."

His jaw flexes, and I swear I see his fingers tighten into fists before he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

For a second, nobody says anything. The weight of whatever this is presses down on me, but I refuse to be the first one to crack.

Finally, Goose exhales sharply through his nose and strides forward, crouching beside my bike like this is just another job. Like I'm just another person. Someone he doesn't even know.

And for some reason, that stings more than I thought it would.

Fine. If Goose wants to act like I don't exist beyond the busted bike sitting in front of him, then so be it.

I square my shoulders and turn away from him, forcing my voice to stay light as I look at Torque instead. "Think you guys can fix it?"

Torque glances at Goose, then back at me, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, we'll take a look at it. Give us a couple days, and we'll let you know what we find."

I nod, shifting on my feet. That's it, then. No reason to stick around and make this more uncomfortable than it already is.

"Alright," I say, keeping my voice casual. "Guess I'll check back later."

I don't bother looking at Goose. He made it clear enough where we stand. Instead, I turn on my heel and start walking away, my boots kicking up little puffs of dust from the gravel lot.

The late morning sun is warm on my back, but it does nothing to ease the cold, tight feeling settling in my chest. It shouldn't bother me. The way he shut down, the way he refused to acknowledge that I'm not just some random customer. It shouldn't matter to me so much.

But it does.

I push the thought away and focus on the sound of my own footsteps, steady and even as I head down the road. I don't have to turn around to know. I can feel the weight of his gaze as I leave.

Goose

I wasn't expecting to see her here. Not now. Not ever.

So when I stepped outside and saw Wren standing there next to that barely-running bike, shock hit me like a gut punch.

My first reaction? Anger.

Not at her. Not exactly. It's Sparrow's fault. She's the one who tore through my life like a goddamn hurricane, leaving nothing but wreckage in her wake.

She's the one who cheated on me, married that rich prick, and never looked back. Wren left town not long after that, if I remember right. At the time, I didn't care where she went. I didn't care about much of anything. I was too pissed at the world, too drunk to give a damn.



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I honestly can't remember the last time I even saw her. Maybe it was before she left, or maybe it was one of those nights when I was too far gone on whiskey to remember my own name. I do recall a couple of the brothers mentioning she stopped by once, but I was too deep in a bottle to care.

And now, here she is. Standing in front of me like some ghost from the past, looking nothing like the kid I remember.

She's definitely not Sparrow.

That's the thing that gets me the most. She looks nothing like her sister, acts nothing like her either. Wren was sharper than her sister although a little more quiet and shy. There's something in her eyes now though, something guarded and heavy.

But none of that matters to me at the moment. I shut it down before it can even start.

I force myself to keep my tone short, professional. Treating her like any other customer and acting like I don't care. And maybe if I pretend hard enough, I'll believe it too.

But when she turns and walks away, something in my chest tightens.

I should let her go. I should turn around, go back inside, and keep pretending as if she is no one to me.

Instead, I just stand there, watching her disappear down the road, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. I want to call her back but for what?

The other guys filter back into the shop, but Torque lingers. I don't have to look at him to know he's watching me, probably reading every damn thought running through my head.

After a long moment, he exhales, crossing his arms over his chest. "You gonna tell me what that was about?"

I shake my head, finally breaking my stare from where Wren just was. "Nothing to tell."

Torque snorts. "Bullshit. You looked like you were ready to take her head off."

I don't answer. Just exhale sharply through my nose and walk past him, heading for the shop like I can shake this off.

I grab Wren's bike on the way, pushing it into the bay with more force than necessary, my grip tight on the handlebars. The sooner I fix this piece of shit, the sooner she's gone.

Maybe she'll take off before the past starts creeping back in, before Sparrow's ghost starts clawing at the edges of my mind.

I keep all of that locked away, buried deep where it belongs. There's a box shoved in the back of my closet, filled with all the little reminders I was too stupid to throw away. Old love notes, pictures, scraps of a past that never should've meant as much as it did.

I should've burned it years ago.

I'd almost forgotten it existed until today.

Until Wren showed up out of nowhere, shaking something loose in my chest that I don't want to acknowledge.

I roll the bike into position, forcing my focus on the work instead of the way my thoughts spiral. One thing at a time. First, fix the bike. Then, when the day's done, I'll go home, pull that old box down, and set fire to every last piece of it.

It's nothing but a reminder anyway.

A reminder that I was never good enough.

Not even for a piece of snatch from the wrong side of the tracks. The same goddamn side I came from.

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### Chapter 2

Wren

The trailer groans with every gust of wind, creaking like it might collapse any second. It's cold here. The kind of chill that seeps into your bones no matter how many blankets you pile on.

But I don't move. I just sit there cross-legged on an old, faded blanket spread across the floor, my back leaning against the peeling wood panel wall, a flashlight beside me, flickering faintly reminding me that I need to get some new batteries.

Dust swirls in the narrow beam of light as I flip through the weathered pages of my old notebook. The cover's half torn off, the pages feel soft and fragile from being touched too many times. I used to fill this thing with thoughts I couldn't say out loud, things I never had the nerve to admit.

Each page feels like I'm peeling open an old wound. There's an ache deep in my chest, reading the words I wrote with teenage hope. Letters, really. Not the "hi, how are you" kind.

No, these were more like...confessions. The way my heart used to beat like a war drum every time he looked my way. How I memorized the sound of his laugh. The way he leaned against his bike like he owned the world. Like nothing could touch him.

I was just a kid to him back then. Sparrow's tagalong little sister. But I watched him

like he hung the moon. And back then, I thought maybe, just maybe, if I wrote the right words, he'd see me.

Only...he did read them.

Just not the way I meant.

My throat tightens as I stop on one of the pages, the handwriting a little messier, like I'd written it in a hurry. I remember this one. I'd left it tucked between the pages, still too shy to say it out loud. But then, a week later, Goose looked at Sparrow like she was his only world. Like I'd imagined he might look at me.

That was the day I knew.

She'd been stealing them.

Sparrow was sneaking into my room, reading my notebook, and taking my words and giving them to Goose like they were hers. And it worked. Of course it worked. She always knew how to be the center of attention, how to be exactly what someone wanted.

She used my words to make him fall in love with her. And I never said a damn thing.

I should've burned this notebook years ago. But I couldn't. Because as much as it hurt, it was the only proof I ever had that my feelings were real.

Now he's back in my life, or I'm back in his, depending on how you look at it, and everything feels tilted. The ache hasn't gone away. If anything, it's worse now that he's seen me all grown up and still looks at me like he doesn't know what to do with me.

The notebook falls shut in my lap as I press my palms against my eyes, trying to force the tears back.

He never even knew it was me. It was all me. She was never what he actually wanted.

I freeze when I hear the rumble of Tim's rusted-out sedan crunching up the gravel drive. My heart jumps to my throat, pounding so hard I feel it behind my eyes. The headlights flicker through the busted window like a warning.

"Shit." I breathe out.

My fingers scramble over the notebook in my lap as I shove it and the others back into the bottom of my bag, stuffing them beneath a change of clothes and a hoodie, like that might somehow hide the truth they carry. The zipper gets stuck halfway up, and I curse under my breath yet again as I yank it closed just before I hear the slam of the car door.

I press the bag close to my side, like maybe if I hold it tight enough, he won't try to take it again.

The last time... God, the last time, he found my notebooks, it was like handing a loaded weapon to someone who already hated me just for breathing.

He'd read every damn word and knew they weren't about him. He knew who they were about. And that made him lose it.

## Page 5

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He came back to our apartment strung out, vibrating with rage, eyes blown wide and hands twitching like he couldn't decide if he wanted to hit me or tear me apart with them.

He did both.

Five times.

He didn't even stop to take off his boots the last time. Just hit the pipe, dragged me by the hair to the bed, and told me it was my fault. That I was a slut. That if I wanted someone like Goose so bad, I'd get what I deserved.

I remember laying there, staring at the ceiling, trying to leave my body like I used to do as a kid when my parents fought in the next room. Pretending I was somewhere else. Someone else.

He finally passed out hours later, the meth wearing off after days without sleep. That was the only reason I made it out of bed. I heard the garbage truck outside and ran barefoot down the stairs like a madwoman, digging through the dumpster until my hands bled on rusted metal and broken glass.

But I found them all. Covered in coffee grounds and old takeout, but still there.

Since then, I've kept them close, hidden in the bottom of whatever bag I carry, like a secret too dangerous to let anyone see. Especially him.

His heavy boots hit the metal steps outside the trailer and the door rattles as he forces

it open, cursing under his breath.

I tuck the bag behind me and pull a ratty blanket over my lap, grabbing the empty coffee mug beside me like that's all I've been doing. Just sitting here, harmless, quiet, obedient.

My heart won't stop racing. Because I know what mood he's in the second I see his eyes.

And I know I might not be able to leave my body this time.

Goose

I work on Wren's bike long past when I should've called it quits and gone home. The shop is quiet now, the sounds of revving engines and the guys bullshitting fading hours ago.

But I stay, hunched over her bike, wrench in hand, using the work to keep my thoughts in check.

It's just another job, I tell myself. Just another busted-up piece of machinery that needs fixing.

But it's a fucking lie.

Because as much as I try to focus on the bike, my mind keeps dragging me back to the past.

I was a cocky bastard back then, full of piss and vinegar, convinced I had the world at my feet. Thought I was untouchable. I had thought Sparrow was mine. That we were meant to be together, that nothing could rip us apart.



I was wrong.

She made me believe in forever, whispered it against my lips, wrote it in little notes she'd leave in my bedroom. Scraps of paper filled with empty promises. I kept every single one, like a fool.

A box full of her words, shoved deep in the back of my closet, as if those little pieces of paper could hold together something that was already breaking.

Then she shattered it.

One moment, I was hers. The next, she was gone.

Ran off with some rich quarterback, left town without looking back. Like I was nothing.

And Wren?

Wren was always there. Quiet. Observing. Watching. Then she was gone too, although I didn't notice at first.

She was just Sparrow's little sister back then. I never paid her much attention. If she was around, she was just a shadow in the background, barely registering in my world. At the time, my head was too wrapped up in her sister, in my own heartbreak, in the anger that burned through me every time I thought about how easily Sparrow tossed me aside.

A deep, rumbling sound from outside the shop pulls me out of my head.

A few seconds later, I hear the unmistakable roll of motorcycles pulling up out front.

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The bay doors creak open, and I don't even bother looking up.

"Shop's closed," I mutter, tightening another bolt.

Blade snorts. "Yeah, we can see that. And yet, here you are."

I stay focused on the bike, jaw tight. I don't have to explain myself. But the Prez isn't one to let things slide.

"Guys said Wren dropped this off today," Timber says casually, leaning against the workbench like he's settling in for a conversation I don't want to have.

I keep my tone even. "And?"

"And," he continues, "you've been in here working on it for hours."

I shrug, forcing myself to sound indifferent. "Just another job."

The words taste like bullshit even as I say them.

Timber and Blade exchange a glance, and I don't miss the way Blade's lips twitch like he's fighting back a smirk. They know me too well.

Timber chuckles, shaking his head. "Funny," he says. "Back in the day, I always figured you and Wren would end up together."

I freeze, my wrench halfway to the next bolt. That throws me. I glance up, frowning.

“Why the hell would you think that?”

Timber’s smirk deepens, and he looks at me like I’m the dumbest bastard alive. “Did you honestly never notice the way she looked at you?”

I stare at him, the words hitting something I wasn’t prepared for. Never noticed the way she looked at me?

I shake my head, scowling. “You’re full of shit.”

Timber shrugs, pushing off the workbench. “Maybe. Or maybe you were too damn blind to see it. Like some other things we won’t mention.” He claps a hand on my now tight shoulders, his tone lighter now. “Get some sleep, Goose. You’re wound too damn tight.”

Blade follows him out, but I stay frozen in place, my grip tight around the wrench.

Never noticed the way she looked at me?

What the hell is he talking about?

My mind flashes back, grasping for memories, but all I can see is Wren watching.

Always watching.

And for the first time since she rode into the shop earlier today, I start wondering what I might have missed that the other guys seem to think they know.

Wren

The sunlight wakes me before anything else does. It’s warm and almost gentle.

For a second, I pretend it's a good morning. That the air smells like coffee and freedom instead of mildew. But then I move, and the ache in my cheek drags me all the way back to reality.

I suck in a breath as the throb sharpens behind my eye. He got me good last night.

Usually, Tim's more careful. He prefers to bruise where no one else will see. But sometimes he slips, especially when he's been using, and the world turns blurry for him. He doesn't care who sees when he's that far gone.

I sit up slowly, my back sore from another night on the hard floor. I seriously need to see if I can find an old mattress in the dumpster behind the thrift store in town.

Tim never came back after he stormed out last night, and a small part of me is grateful. The rest of me is just waiting for the next storm.

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My bag is still there, tucked beneath my blanket, zipped tight around the only pieces of myself I've managed to keep hidden from him.

I check the front pocket and my stomach knots when I see the cash is gone. He must've rifled through it while I was too out of it to fight back.

Luckily, I'm not stupid. I never keep all of it in one place anymore.

There's a stash hidden under a loose board in the bathroom. Folded bills in a plastic sandwich bag. Just enough to scrape by.

I make my way to the tiny bathroom and flick open the moth eaten curtain covering the small window to let light in. The mirror is cracked, but the reflection doesn't lie.

My cheekbone is red and swollen, the outline of his hand faint but clear enough to know exactly what happened.

I sigh, grabbing the cheap concealer from my makeup bag. It's not the right shade, and it doesn't do much, but I dab it on anyway.

No one who's paying attention would be fooled. But most people in White Summer know how to look the other way. I should know. I grew up here.

I pull a clean old black tee with the sleeves cut off over my head and comb through my hair with my fingers pulling it into a messy ponytail. My sunglasses go on last, the thick black frames big enough to cover most of the damage.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I step out into the morning light, the sun already giving fair warning it's going to be a blistering day out.

I need coffee. Real coffee. Not that instant crap I'm sure we still have a little of in the trailer.

That means going to Bella's Brew. The little shop in town that I remember smelling like sugary pastries.

Bella was always kind, even when I was just "Sparrow's little sister." She might remember me. Or she might not.

Either way, I need caffeine and a few minutes in a place that doesn't stink of rotting floorboards and desperation.

And after that... I need to figure out who's hiring.

Tips are my only shot at keeping something for myself. Something Tim doesn't know about. Something he can't take after he's beat me.

Because if I don't find a way to make a little money of my own I may never find a way to get away from him.

The thirty minute walk to town seems to take forever. I'm not used to being without my bike. Back in the city everything was close to the apartment.

Rounding a corner, I spot the sign for Bella's on the door across the street and hurry over to it.

The bell over the door jingles as I push it open, and I inhale deep. God, it smells incredible in here. Warm vanilla, roasted espresso and something sweet baking in the

back.

The air-conditioning is a soft contrast to the already rising heat outside, and for a moment, I just stand there, letting it all soak in like I'm starving for it.

The place hasn't changed much. Chalkboard menus, mismatched mugs, cozy booths. It feels like it belongs in a bigger town, but somehow it works here in White Summer.

I spot Bella immediately behind the counter. She's still effortlessly gorgeous in that earthy, boho kind of way, with soft waves in her dark hair and a fitted vintage tee tucked into ripped jeans.

She's wiping down the counter while chatting with another woman.

The other woman is blonde, with confident eyes and a cowboy-casual vibe that enhances how beautiful she is. Boots, denim shirt knotted at the waist, the kind of look that says she could run a ranch and still bake you a pie.

Bella glances up when the bell rings again and her eyes land on me. Her smile falters just a hair before she plasters it back on.

"Hey there!" she says, setting down the rag. "Welcome to Bella's Brew."

She says it like she doesn't recognize me. Maybe she doesn't. It has been years.

But then she tilts her head, her smile softening into something more curious.

"...Wren?"

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I nod, heart thudding. “Yeah. Hi.”

“Oh my God. I thought that was you.” She rounds the counter and pulls me in for a light hug. I go stiff for a second, but she doesn’t press. “It’s been forever. You’re back in town?”

“Yeah. Just got back last week.” I force a smile. “I’ve been meaning to stop by.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. This is Hayden, she co-runs Wolf’s Landing out near the ridge with my husband, Blade.”

Hayden offers a small wave and a friendly smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I say, adjusting my sunglasses even though it’s dumb to wear them indoors.

I know they’re looking. I know Bella’s looking. The bruise might be faint under makeup, but the swelling’s still there, and the sunglasses probably make it more obvious.

I glance up at the menu chalkboard. “Can I get a large iced coffee? Just black.”

Bella nods, but she doesn’t move to make it right away. “You want anything to eat? I’ve got fresh muffins, banana bread, scones...”

I shake my head. “Just the coffee. Thanks.”



She hesitates another second, then heads back behind the counter. I feel her eyes on me the whole time, like she's trying to figure out the right question to ask.

Hayden steps up next to her and starts loading the espresso machine, but she's sneaky about the way she's watching me too.

"So," Bella starts casually, "you staying with family or...?"

"Not really. Just...renting a place."

"Out by the ridge?" she asks, her tone light, but I can feel the edge of something beneath it.

"Yeah," I say, keeping my voice even. "The trailer on my family's old land."

Bella glances at Hayden, then back at me. "That place was supposed to be condemned, wasn't it?"

"Guess no one followed through," I mutter.

There's a long pause before Hayden hands over the coffee. "You ever worked in a coffee shop before?"

I blink, caught off guard. "Uh...no. Why?"

"We're short-staffed," Bella says smoothly, but her gaze is sharp. "And you're clearly not afraid of early mornings."

My hand tightens around the cup. The lid creaks. She's trying to help. Offering a job without prying, but we both know what she's doing. She saw the bruise. She saw it the second I walked in.

She's not asking what happened. She's giving me a way to fix it. A way to get out.

"I'll think about it," I say softly. "Thanks."

"No pressure," Bella says, her voice gentle now. "But if you want a place where your tips don't disappear out of your wallet before the end of the day...we've got one."

I meet her eyes then. She doesn't look away. It's an odd feeling to be seen without opening up to someone.

Bella smiles gently and reaches for a cloth to wipe her hands. "Hang on a second. I'm gonna run to the back and let my mom know you're here. She used to worry about you. Always asking if anyone had heard anything."

Before I can stop her, she's already disappearing through the swinging door that leads to the back kitchen.

I'm left standing there, coffee in hand with my heart hammering like I've been caught doing something wrong.

I shift uncomfortably, sipping from my cup to distract myself. It's strong, maybe a little bitter, but it's perfect. And it reminds me I'm still standing, still here. No matter what Tim tries to take from me, he hasn't taken me yet.

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Hayden gives me a small smile from behind the counter. “She’s not wrong, you know.”

I glance up at her.

“You do look like you could use something to eat.”

“I’m fine,” I say too quickly, then sigh. “I’m just not hungry.”

She doesn’t push, and I appreciate it.

But I barely get another sip in before the door bangs open again and Sunshine bursts into the room like her name is a full-blown personality.

Same long silver-streaked hair, flowing peasant top, and enough bracelets on her wrist to sound like wind chimes when she walks.

“Oh my stars,” she exclaims, eyes lighting up the moment she sees me. “Wren! Baby, look at you!”

Before I can react, I’m being pulled into a warm, tight hug that smells like cinnamon and garden herbs. Her arms are strong and familiar, like she’s trying to squeeze all the years apart into a single moment.

“I told Bella you’d come back one day,” she says, pulling back just enough to hold my face in her hands. Her eyes, sharp despite the soft laugh lines around them, search my face and linger just a second too long near my cheek.

But like Bella, she says nothing about the bruise. Instead, her hands drop to my shoulders and she makes a soft tscking sound.

“You’re too skinny,” she declares. “You always were, but now you’re really too thin. When was the last time someone fed you properly? Don’t even answer that. Sit down. Sit, sit. I’ve got warm blueberry scones, and I made a fresh tomato basil quiche this morning.”

“I’m not—” I try to protest, but she waves me off.

“Nope. Not hearing it. You were always polite, but you didn’t eat enough even then. And I know for a fact your sister never let you have the first bite of anything if she could help it.”

I blink, caught off guard by the mention of Sparrow. I’ve tried my best over the years to forget she even exists. But Sunshine just pats my shoulder, herding me toward a booth like I’m still seventeen and sneaking in after school with a backpack full of library books.

Hayden quirks a grin and leans toward me. “You’re about to eat. Just accept your fate.”

I do.

Because honestly...It’s been a while since someone looked at me like I mattered without wanting something in return.

And I don’t think I can remember the last time someone fed me because they wanted to. Not because I had to earn it, not because they were expecting a favor or sex or silence afterward.

I slide into the booth and wrap my hands around the iced coffee like it's a lifeline. The tears try to rise, but I blink them back fast.

Sunshine brings over a plate, muttering about getting more butter and jam before disappearing again in a flurry of clinking bracelets.

Bella follows with a steaming mug. "Just in case you change your mind after breakfast," she says, setting it down. "Hazelnut. With cream. Your favorite, right?"

I stare at it, something in my chest cracking wide open.

She remembered.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel just a little bit less invisible.

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### Chapter 3

#### Goose

As if my thoughts from the last couple of days conjured her from thin air, she walks into the shop like she owns the ground under her feet.

Something about her just feels...off. Tense. She's holding her chin high, shoulders squared with sunglasses hiding most of her face. Like she's wound too tight, and it wouldn't take much to make her snap.

I know immediately she's hiding something and trying her best to act like nothing's wrong. Like she's just here to pick up her bike and be on her way.

I wipe my hands on a rag while walking slowly over to the counter where I left her keys. I just grunt "bike's done" and hold them out.

She takes a step forward, that carefully composed mask still in place as she reaches for them.

But as she does, the sunlight shifts through the shop window, catching her face in just the right light. She tucks her hair behind her ear at the same moment and for a split second, her sunglasses slip down the bridge of her nose.

That's when I see it. A bruise blooming across her cheekbone that she has tried to hide beneath concealer and attitude.

My eyes turn into slits and freezes before yanking her glasses back up as if maybe I didn't catch it. Like she could erase it. But it's too late.

Everything inside me turns cold and sharp. I feel an unexpected rage at the thought that someone could do that to her.

"Who the fuck did that?"

My voice is low, tight. Controlled in the way a storm might be calm right before it tears your house off the foundation.

She stiffens instantly as I reach out and catch her wrist gently, but firm enough that she knows I'm not letting this go.

Her eyes flare behind the dark lenses. Her whole body goes rigid at my touch.

"Wren," I say again, softer this time but no less serious. "Who did it?"

She jerks back out of my hand like I burned her. "It's none of your damn business, Goose."

I take a step back, hands up, but my jaw's clenched so hard I hear it popping in my ears.

"Bullshit," I grit out. "You think I'm just gonna stand here and let you say some shit like that? After knowing you for so long? You think I'm gonna let someone put their fucking hands on you and walk away from it?"

She doesn't answer. Just stands there, trembling slightly, clutching her bag like it's some kind of shield.

“I’m fine,” she mutters. “I just want my bike.”

“You’re not fine.”

Her jaw sets. “It’s not your problem.”

I take a slow breath. I know that tone. It’s shame. It’s fear. It’s someone who’s been made to feel like speaking up will only make it worse.



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And fuck, I know I'm not entitled to her answers. I know she has every right to walk away and never tell me a damn thing.

But seeing that bruise on her face. It does something to me. A feeling so profound that I can't ignore it.

I'm not some young misfit anymore. I'm not nursing a broken heart and watching her sister run off with some silver-spooned asshole.

I'm a man now. A patched-in brother of this club. And nobody gets to hurt someone like that. Someone like her.

Especially not her.

She grabs the keys off the counter and turns toward the door. Before she walks through it, she turns back to me.

"For the record? You don't know me Goose. You never really did."

I let her go without another word.

The shop door swings shut behind her with a dull clang, and I'm still staring at it like I can somehow see through it.

Like if I just focus hard enough, I'll see the truth spelled out in big bold letters. Who did that to her, and how many pieces do I need to break them into?

I run a hand through my hair, trying to get my breathing under control. My jaw is still clenched, and my hands are twitchy.

I need to hit something. Or someone. Preferably the bastard who left that bruise on Wren's face.

She didn't want to talk. I get that. But she looked right at me like she was looking at a stranger. Like I was someone who could see that kind of pain and not give a damn.

She really doesn't know me at all either if she thinks that.

The door to the back office creaks open and Timber steps out looking at a piece of paper in his hands.

He pauses mid-step when he catches the storm on my face, then casts a glance at the door Wren just walked out of.

"Well," he says, folding the paper and putting it in his pocket, "what'd you piss her off about this time?"

I let out a rough breath, crossing my arms and leaning back against the counter, my whole body tense.

"I didn't piss her off," I mutter.

Timber arches a brow. "Could've fooled me."

I don't answer right away. I turn back to the door, grabbing the counter in front of me. My grip on the edge tightens until my knuckles go white. I feel Timber's gaze settle heavier on me.

“You saw something,” he says. Not a question.

I nod once, jaw tight. “She’s got a bruise on her face. Tried to hide it with makeup and sunglasses.”

Timber’s expression darkens immediately. The easy sarcasm vanishes from his face like someone flipped a switch. His voice drops low, serious now. “You sure?”

“I saw it. No doubt.”

“Did she say who?”

I shake my head. “She wouldn’t tell me. Said it’s none of my damn business.”

Timber lets out a sharp breath through his nose. “Is she wrong about that?”

“Yeah,” I say, voice low. “She is.”

There’s a silence between us, heavy with unspoken things. Like the kind of quiet before a storm hits. And I know Timber’s thinking the same thing I am. Someone hurt one of ours.

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And Wren might not be wearing a patch, but she grew up around us. She's club-adjacent whether she likes it or not. And someone touched her. Marked her.

That makes it our business.

Timber gives me a long look. "You want me to pull Snake in on this? Have him do a little digging?"

I hesitate. Part of me wants to charge off half-cocked, track down every person she's been around since coming back into town.

But I also know Wren. She's proud and guarded. Hurting in ways I probably can't begin to guess.

If I go over her head without thinking it through, she'll shut down. She might run. And next time I see her, the bruise might be worse. Or I might not see her at all.

"I'll handle it for now," I say finally.

Timber studies me for a second longer, then nods. "Alright. But if you change your mind, say the word. No one lays hands on one of ours. Not ever."

He turns and walks back toward the office, but the fire he just lit in my chest stays burning.

Wren

The door barely shuts behind me when I feel fingers clamp down hard around my arm. Shit.

I didn't even see his car outside. He must've parked it behind the trailer or down the road. I thought he was gone. That was my first mistake.

My second was thinking I could breathe for even half a second.

Tim jerks me forward, his grip bruising. His face is flushed, eyes sharp with suspicion and a twitch at the corner of his mouth that tells me exactly how thin the thread he's hanging from is.

"Where the hell you been?" he demands, voice low and tight like he's trying not to yell. Like the effort it takes not to explode is somehow a favor to me.

I steady my breath. Don't show fear. Don't challenge him. Keep it even.

"I was in town," I say. "Putting in applications. We need the money."

His eyes narrow. "You do that before or after you went to that coffee shop?"

My heart jumps, but I force myself to stay still. He's fishing. That means he doesn't know anything. Just guessing.

"Before," I lie smoothly. "I just stopped in for a coffee on my way out."

He lets go of my arm slowly, but not before he makes sure I feel the point of his thumb dig in right where the bruise on my bicep from last week is still healing.

I step back out of reach and keep my face blank.

He grunts, satisfied. “Well, good. Maybe you’ll actually bring something useful to the table for once.”

I don’t answer. There’s nothing I could say that wouldn’t make it worse.

He turns, grabs the dingy hoodie from the back of the tattered couch, and tosses it over one shoulder. “Get changed. We’re going out.”

I blink. “What?”

“I got a meeting at the Blackcat. Some guy about a job.”

“What kind of job?”

He snorts. “Not the kind you fill out W-2s for, babe. Don’t worry about it. Just look decent, yeah?”

I go cold. Because I know exactly what that means.

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This isn't some under-the-table kitchen gig or weed trimming. This is the kind of job that involves back rooms and guns with people that have nothing to lose. People even Tim's scared of, though he'll never admit it.

Still, I nod and head to the back room without another word.

I change fast. Black jeans, clean tee, scuffed boots. Something that won't draw attention.

Something I can run in, if I have to. I shove my bag under the mattress not wanting to bring it with me. Not when I know he'll be watching me like a hawk the whole damn night.

When I come back out, he's already lit a smoke, pacing by the door.

"You ready?" he asks without looking at me.

No. I'll never be ready for any of this. But I nod anyway. "Yeah. Let's go."

The ride to the Blackcat is quiet, except for the buzz of the broken window rattling every time we hit a bump and the occasional snort from Tim as he mumbles to himself.

I keep my eyes out the window, heart beating heavily in my chest like it knows danger lies ahead and wants no part of it.

The parking lot is already half full by the time we pull in, the sun dipping behind the

hills, throwing long shadows across the cracked pavement.

Bikes are lined up near the front, chrome flashing in the last light. A few pickups. One sleek black car I don't recognize. That must be who he's meeting.

Tim kills the engine and leans back, taking a deep breath like he's about to put on a mask. I reach for the door handle, desperate to just get it over with but he grabs my wrist before I can open it.

"Hey," he says, and I already hate his tone. Too smooth. Too rehearsed.

I turn slowly. "What?"

He looks at me like I'm slow. "The guy I'm meeting? He's got a thing for pretty little brunettes."

I stare at him. My pulse starts pounding.

He grins like this is funny. "So you're gonna be nice, yeah? Smile, laugh at his jokes. Flirt a little. Make him feel like he's the smartest guy in the room. Whatever it takes to get him talking."

"No," I say flatly. "Absolutely not."

His face darkens. "You think I'm bringing you along for the company?" he snaps. "You want to eat, don't you? You want a roof? If this guy likes you. You charm him, we're in. We get work."

I shake my head. "I'm not pimping myself out so you can score some shady job."

Wrong answer.



Before I can even reach for the door again, he lunges across the seat, grabs my arm and yanks me toward him, fingers digging hard into my shoulder.

“Don’t be stupid, Wren,” he growls, voice low but dangerous. “This is how the world works. You play your part, or you make shit worse. For both of us.”

I twist away, fury burning in my throat. “Let go of me!”

We’re out of the car now, walking toward the bar, but I don’t get three steps before he grabs my arm again and shakes me hard enough to rattle my teeth.

“You listen when I talk to you,” he hisses. “You don’t get to have opinions. Not tonight.”

My breath stutters in my chest, rage mixing with old fear, the kind I thought I buried years ago but keeps coming back every time he lays a hand on me.

I wrench away and glare at him. “If you want to whore yourself out for work, go right ahead. But don’t you dare ask me to sell pieces of myself so you can feel like a man.”

He steps toward me again, jaw tight, eyes wild, but then there’s voices. From the porch. Laughter. A couple bikers coming out for a smoke I think.

But Tim freezes, right as a giant man throws him down into the dirt. As I look at the man's back, it only takes a second for my brain to realize who it is.

### Chapter 4

#### Goose

The beer's cold, the music's decent, and the club's in good spirits tonight.

Bella's here with Blade, leaning into him in the way women do when they're secure as hell in the man next to them.

Mina is curled into Timber's side, laughing at something Bear just said. Hayden's tossing fries at Torque across the table, and Kimmie and Jesse are already halfway to tipsy.

Me? I'm in the corner, nursing my bottle and barely hearing the jokes flying back and forth. Wren's bruise is still burned into the back of my skull.

She looked at me like she dared me to care. And I do. Way more than I want to.

"You're quiet tonight," Bella says, catching my attention. She's got a glass of wine in hand and that perceptive glint in her eye. "Not like you."

The Prez snorts. "He's brooding. Again. I told him to do something about it."

"About what?" Bella asks, glancing between us. Then her face softens a little. "Is this about Wren?"

I don't answer right away. Just lift my bottle in a shrug that says maybe.

Bella smiles gently. “She was always sweet. Quiet, but sharp. Always scribbling in one of her notebooks, even when Sparrow was busy holding court.”

That gets my attention.

I turn to her. “What notebooks?”

“Oh, Wren always had one,” Bella says, eyes lighting a little with the memory. “She was always writing. Poems, thoughts, little stories. I remember one time Sparrow left one of Wren’s notebooks on the counter at the coffee shop.”

My brows knit. “She left it?”

Bella nods. “I opened it, thinking it was hers at first, and read this...beautiful page. It was a love poem. Simple, raw, and full of feeling. I remember thinking, ‘Damn, this girl feels things.’ Thought it was Sparrow’s at the time. That’s who I gave it back to because she’s the one that left it. But now...I think it was Wren’s. No way Sparrow ever had that kind of depth.”

My stomach tightens. I stare down at the table, that familiar twist working its way through my gut. All that time I thought she was the one pouring her heart out to me.

What if it was Wren all along?

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Blade, sitting on Bella's other side, gives a low chuckle. "I never understood why you were so hung up on Sparrow anyway. Wren had more soul in one page of that notebook than Sparrow had in her whole body."

Torque lifts his beer and shrugs. "I always wondered too. Plus, let's be real—Sparrow never let Goose get past a make-out session. And only when Wren was in the room. Creepy as hell."

I blink. "What?"

Blade smirks. "You seriously didn't catch that? You don't think it's weird she always made sure Wren was nearby when she gave you any attention at all?"

Prez laughs and claps a hand on my back. "Hell, you really never noticed that shit, did you?"

The table erupts in laughter.

"Blind motherfucker," Blood mutters around his drink, shaking his head.

Bella giggles. "We used to feel so bad for Wren. She'd sit there, pretending not to watch the two of you, pretending she didn't care while Sparrow soaked up every ounce of your attention."

And suddenly...everything shifts.

The notes. The glances. The way Wren always seemed to disappear quietly, the second

I noticed her at all. The way Sparrow always had just the right words to say... Words that didn't sound like her at all.

It hits me in the chest like a freight train. They weren't her words. They were someone else's. They were Wren's.

I sit back slowly, the noise around the table fading as it sinks in.

I was in love with a ghost. And the one person who really saw me was standing just outside the spotlight the whole damn time.

I'm sitting there, frozen, lost in memories of the past. Realization hammering in my chest like a goddamn engine backfiring.

Everything's shifting inside of me. Wren wasn't just some quiet kid hanging around. She was the voice I carried in my back pocket for half a goddamn year. She was the one I fell for, and I never even knew it.

My bottle sits untouched on the table as I stare into space, still hearing Bella's words echo in my head.

"She was always writing... most beautiful love poem I ever read..."

And then we all hear raised voices coming from outside. It cuts through the bar like a blade above the music. The laughter around the table quiets instantly as we all turn to look out the window.

And my blood ignites.

Wren's in the parking lot. What must be her boyfriend, a fucker with dead eyes and twitchy hands, is standing toe-to-toe with her, gripping her arm hard enough I can see

the strain from here.

She's trying to yank away, her mouth moving fast, but he's not listening. He's shaking her like she's a fucking rag doll.

Before I even realize I've moved, I'm on my feet and out the door. I hear the Prez call my name and chairs scraping against the floor. I cross the parking lot in a blur. The dumb fuck doesn't even see me coming.

I slam into him full force. My shoulder connects with his chest and sends him flying backward, heels skidding on the gravel before he crashes flat onto his back with a choked grunt.

Wren gasps but I don't stop. I'm completely consumed by rage.

I go down after him, swinging hard, one punch, then another, and another. The second my knuckles meet flesh, something inside me snaps loose. I don't see anything but red. I'm not thinking, not pulling back.

This bastard hurt her.

He laid hands on her.

He made her flinch.

And now he's going to pay.

A roar rips out of my chest as I drive another blow down, but two sets of arms haul me back.

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“Enough, Goose!” Prez barks, yanking me off the guy as I lunge forward again. “You’re gonna fucking kill him!”

I’m breathing hard, every muscle tense, my hands shaking with the force I’m holding back.

The asshole groans on the pavement, blood leaking from his mouth and his cheek swelling fast.

He props himself up on one elbow and spits out blood like it’s nothing. Fucker must be on something.

Even his eyes suggest he’s been on a bender. How the fuck did Wren get hooked up with this mother fucker anyway?

Then his eyes cut to Wren, filled with something ugly and he sneers, “This is your fault, bitch. I’m fucking done! You’ll pay for this! You hear me?”

I nearly break free again, but Blade tightens his grip on my jacket.

“Don’t.” he warns low. “Not here. Not now.”

I’m still seething, but Wren? She’s just standing there. Her sunglasses gone, her bruise now on full display. She’s trembling, but her chin is still high. She looks like she might fall apart at any second.

The Prez releases me slowly. “You good?” he asks under his breath.

No. Not even close. But I nod. Because right now I've got one priority and that's getting her away from him.

And after that? That son of a bitch better pray I don't find him alone.

Wren

I stand there frozen, gravel biting into the soles of my boots. I wrap my arms tightly around myself as Tim's car screeches out of the parking lot, tires kicking up dust and rage behind him.

And just like that, he's gone. With the last of my cash. With my clothes. With my safety. What little I had anyway.

I don't even realize I'm shaking until the taillights disappear down the road leaving behind just me and the silence that comes after disaster.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I'm stuck in the middle of a parking lot full of people I haven't seen in years, with nothing but a bruise on my face that won't stop burning.

I take a step back, swallowing hard, blinking fast to keep the tears at bay. My whole body's wired tight, like a guitar string pulled too far and ready to snap.

"Wren."

I spin around at the sound of my name, and Goose is standing a few feet away like some kind of dark storm still coming down from the high of nearly beating a man to death.



And they're all with him. The whole damn club and their women, staring at me like I'm some wounded bird that just crash landed on their doorstep.

I feel exposed. Cornered. And then the shame curdles into anger. My eyes lock on Goose, my voice sharp and too loud, but I can't stop it.

"What the hell do you think I'm supposed to do now?"

He opens his mouth, but I don't let him speak. I'm spiraling and I know it, but I can't stop.

"You just beat the shit out of him in front of everyone. You think that fixed anything?" My hands are shaking, my voice rising. "You think that made things better for me?"

Goose takes a step forward, his jaw clenched, eyes softer now but still dangerous. Too much. It's all too much.

I wave him off before he can answer.

"Everyone saw. You think I can go back there now?" My voice cracks on the last word. "You think Tim's just gonna let that slide? He'll kill me next time, Goose. He's high and he's crazy, and you just gave him a reason."

Silence stretches across the parking lot. No one moves.

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I look around with my heart pounding. My eyes are stinging as I try not to fall apart in front of all of them but it's too late for that. I've already shattered.

"I have nowhere to go," I whisper. "No money. No clothes. No idea what the hell I'm supposed to do next."

My eyes flick back to Goose.

And for the first time in my life, I let him see the truth. The fear, the exhaustion, the weight I've been carrying for way too long.

And all I can think is...what now?

Goose

She's standing there in the middle of the parking lot like her whole world just collapsed and hell, maybe it did. Wren's shoulders are tight, her face a mix of fury and fear. She's afraid he'll kill her.

And she's right. I saw it in that bastard's eyes when he spit blood at her. He's not just high and mean...he's dangerous. And she's been living in that hell, hiding behind a mask so no one would see.

Not anymore.

I take a step forward, slow and sure, until I'm right in front of her. She's still trembling, her chin tilted up like she's trying to hold on to her pride even as

everything falls apart around her.

“Wren,” I say in a low, firm voice. “You’ll come with me.”

Her eyes widen. “Goose, no. I’ll figure it out...”

“No.” I shut that shit down before she can even finish. “You need a place. I got space. That’s it.”

She opens her mouth to argue again, but I raise a brow, not in the mood to play nice.

“I’m not asking.”

She stares at me for a second too long, like she’s trying to gauge how serious I am. I let her see all of it. The hard line I’ve drawn. The part of me that’s not walking away.

Finally, she lets out a breath and looks away. “I don’t have much. Just some clothes, a few notebooks... He won’t be there right away. He’ll be too busy getting high or running his mouth somewhere.”

“Then we go now,” I say. “Grab what you need before he shows.”

Prez steps up beside me, nodding once. “Sprocket, Gear,” he calls out without looking back, “you’re riding behind them. Make sure there’s no trouble.”

The twins nod and peel off from the group, already heading for their bikes.

Wren’s gaze flicks between all of us...me, Timber, the rest of the club and I see it click for her. This isn’t just me stepping in. It’s the whole damn brotherhood.

“We don’t let people hurt what’s ours,” Prez says simply, then gives her a pointed

look. “And you’ve always been one of us, Wren. Even if you didn’t know it.”

She swallows hard and whispers, “Okay.”

I turn to lead her toward my bike, fists still aching from earlier and heart pounding with something I haven’t felt in a long time.

### Chapter 5

#### Wren

We pull up to the old trailer and everything in me tightens. Even in the dark, it looks worse than it did just a few hours ago. Like the night just makes all the broken edges sharper.

The porch is half-collapsed, the sidings peeled back in spots, and the roof sags like it's given up the fight.

There's no light coming from the windows, not that I expected any. We didn't have electricity. We didn't even rent the place. It was abandoned.

He cuts the engine and I take my helmet off, suddenly aware of how quiet it is. The crickets have even gone still, like they don't want to breathe too loud in this place. Behind me, Sprocket and Gear do the same, their twin engines winding down in sync.

Goose doesn't say a word, but I feel his eyes on me. I hate it. Hate that he's seeing this. This rotted little shell of a life I was surviving in. I wrap my arms around myself, shifting awkwardly.

The twins don't ask for permission, they just head toward the door like they've done this a hundred times before, checking corners, clearing a space.

I hear the creak of the door, the dull thud of footsteps inside, and then Gear calls out a

moment later, “Clear!”

Goose is at my side instantly, holding out a heavy-duty flashlight. “Take your time.”

I nod once, keeping my eyes down as I take it from him. “Thanks.”

The door groans when I push it open, and the smell hits me first. Damp wood, stale smoke, and something metallic beneath it all.

I sweep the light across the living room, there’s clothes thrown over broken furniture. A cracked mirror with blood dried at the corner. A spoon and lighter still sitting on the table like Tim might be back at any second to pick up where he left off.

I walk straight to the back, to the bedroom where I’d carved out the only corner of peace I could find.

I reach under the blanket on the mattress and tug free the small duffel I’d kept hidden under the bed. The zipper is worn, but it still works. I check to make sure all of my notebooks are still there. I press my hand to the top one, just to be sure.

Next I grab what little clothing I own. A few shirts, jeans, underwear, one hoodie I’d kept hidden in the closet behind a busted vent where Tim never bothered to look. I shove it all into the bag, not caring how wrinkled or mixed-up it is.

That’s it. That’s my whole life. It fits in one bag.

I take a breath as I straighten, the flashlight beam falling across the edge of the mattress. There’s a small stain on the floor. Faint. Old. But I remember how it got there. I turn away before the memory can swallow me.

When I step back into the doorway, Goose is standing at the bottom of the steps, arms

crossed, eyes locked on the door like he's expecting a war to walk out.

Instead, it's just me.

And I swear, the second he sees the bag in my hand and the weariness on my face, something in his expression softens.

I walk down the steps slowly, the bag slung over my shoulder, notebooks pressed close to my chest. He doesn't ask questions. Doesn't say a word.

He just motions towards the bikes. The twins are already sitting on theirs and next to Goose's bike, is my own.

They must have found it behind the trailer and brought it around. I certainly don't want to leave it behind. Tim would probably sell it.

Walking over, I put my helmet on head and tighten the strap of my bag so it doesn't fall off while riding down the road.

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We all start our engines at the same time. The sound vibrates in the air around us as we head back down the driveway. I follow behind Goose while the twins are behind me. And for the first time in a long time... I feel like I can breathe.

The road to Wolf's Ridge winds like a ribbon through the trees, the headlights casting long shadows that sway with the breeze.

The farther we drive, the quieter the world becomes until the silence settles in my bones and feels something like peace.

The scent of night air is earthy and clean. Nothing like the rank staleness of the trailer I've been surviving in.

When we finally pull into the gravel drive, our bike tires crunch to a stop in front of a small log cabin nestled deep in the woods.

There's no sign of the other cabins, though I know they're out here along this stretch of road tucked away like little secrets only the club knows how to find. A porch light glows amber, softening the edges of the dark.

It feels like another world.

Goose kills his engine, kicking out his kickstand. I follow slowly, nerves coiling in my gut as we both make our way to the front door. My heart's pounding again, though for once it's not out of fear, just uncertainty.

He grabs my bag without asking, like it's the most natural thing in the world, and



leads the way up the steps.

The porch creaks under our boots, but it's a welcoming kind of sound. Like it belongs to something old and trusted.

He unlocks the door and holds it open until I walk in ahead of him.

Warmth hits me immediately. Literal heat, from the small stove tucked into the corner, and something else too.

The inside of the cabin smells like cedar wood and worn leather, with a faint trace of smoke with motor oil that clings to Goose no matter where he goes.

There's a well-worn couch against one wall, a few throw pillows scattered on it. A flannel blanket draped over the arm. Books stacked beside the TV.

A few framed photos hang crookedly on the walls of him and the guys, him on a bike, one of him and Timber at some outdoor cookout.

It's a man's space, sure, but not cold or empty. It feels lived in.

"Spare bedroom's yours," Goose says quietly, nodding toward a hallway off to the right.

That's all he says. No fanfare. No awkward questions. No 'are you okay' pity I'm too raw to handle.

I walk down the hall, past a bathroom with a clean white towel folded neatly on the sink, and stop at the open door.

The room's small, just a full-sized bed with gray flannel sheets, a wooden dresser,

and a window that looks out into the dark. Moonlight filters through the glass, laying silver streaks across the floor.

I stand there for a long moment, my hand still wrapped around the strap of my bag, not quite crossing the threshold.

The last place I slept was on a blanket on the floor, a space I had to guard like a dog guarding a bone. No door to shut. No real walls. Just threats and silence.

This room...It's quiet in a different way.

It smells clean. The sheets are fresh. There's no mold in the corners, no damp rot clinging to the drywall. There's no bloodstain on the floor from the last time someone got too angry.

I take a shaky breath. This shouldn't feel foreign, but it does.

Goose lingers behind me in the hallway, arms crossed, watching me the same way you'd watch a wounded animal; calm, still, giving me space.

"I don't know what to say," I murmur without turning around.

"You don't have to say anything," he replies. His voice is low and even. "You're safe here."

Safe.

The word lands in my chest like a weighted blanket. Too heavy and too kind all at once. I blink fast, jaw tight. I don't cry anymore, not when it counts, anyway. But something about hearing those words, from him, in this quiet cabin tucked away from the world...

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It almost breaks me.

I nod instead and step inside, finally letting myself set the bag down near the dresser. My hand brushes the top of it.

The notebooks inside are warm from my body heat, from being clutched too tight all night. I unzip it halfway just to make sure they're still there as if they might have blown out while riding down the road.

The pages are full of things I never said aloud. Words I wrote when I was still naïve enough to believe someone like Goose might one day look at me and see me.

He was never supposed to see this version of me though.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, feeling the give of the mattress beneath me and take another deep breath. Softer this time.

The flannel blanket smells like soap and sun. There's no broken springs to dig into my back. No cigarette burns on the sheet.

It feels like a bed, not a trap. I glance toward the doorway. Goose is still there, eyes steady and unreadable as he watches me.

"You don't have to stand there like I'm gonna bolt," I say quietly, half a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. "I'm too tired to run."

His mouth twitches with just a hint of amusement, but I'll take it. "Good. I wasn't

planning on chasing you.”

A beat passes.

“If you need anything,” he says after a moment, voice dipping even lower, “you knock. I’m just down the hall.”

I nod again. “Thanks, Goose.”

His gaze lingers a moment longer, then he pushes off the door frame and walks back down the hall, boots thudding softly against the wood. A second later, I hear a door shut.

And just like that, I’m alone. But not alone in the way I’ve been. Not alone like left behind. Not alone, like forgotten.

Just...alone in the quiet of a safe place, with nothing threatening to crash through the door or demand something from me I don’t want to give.

I lie back against the bed and stare up at the ceiling.

The stillness feels strange at first. My mind tries to chase it off with fear. Tries to remind me that Tim might come looking, that this might all be temporary.

But somewhere deep down, where instinct still speaks through the fog, I know better. Goose won’t let anything happen to me here.

And for tonight, maybe that’s enough.

Goose

I lie in the dark, arms folded beneath my head, staring at the ceiling like it might offer me answers.

The room is quiet except for the soft ticking of the clock on the nightstand and the distant hum of the trees outside.

But inside me, it's chaos.

I should be sleeping. Hell, I should be doing a dozen other things besides thinking about the girl sleeping just down the hall.

Only she's not a girl anymore. And the version of her that used to tag along behind Sparrow like a shadow, that's not who she is now.

The woman I brought into my cabin tonight...she's got bruises on her cheek and scars I can't see yet.

She's fierce, even while trembling. She's exhausted, but still walking forward. And she's in my house, in my space, wrapped up in a bed that used to be empty, and it's messing with my head in ways I didn't see coming.

I shift restlessly, jaw tight, every part of me too aware of her presence down the hall.

My body's reacting like it hasn't in years. Like something primal in me woke up the second I saw her bruised and stubborn in the parking lot, trying to pretend she wasn't breaking apart inside.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

But it's not just the heat or the ache or the way she looked standing in that doorway like she was waiting for permission to breathe again.

It's the truth unraveling behind my ribs.

All those years ago, I thought I was in love with Sparrow. Thought her silly little notes and poems were what kept me going when everything else in my life felt like shit.

I kept them tucked in my glovebox and in my pockets. I reread them so often I had the words memorized. I thought they were proof that she saw me...really saw me.

But now...those same words sound different in my head. They sound like Wren.

I hear her voice, softer, more honest, aching, as those old lines play back in my memory.

Lines about watching someone from the shadows. About loving someone you couldn't have. About being overlooked, forgotten, but still loving anyway.

Sparrow never spoke like that. She didn't feel like that.

And I think about what Bella said. "I saw one once. A page from Wren's notebook. It was the most beautiful love poem I ever read."

Christ.

Could I have been wrong all this time?

Was it Wren who wrote those notes?

If it was...that changes everything.

Because if she felt that way about me back then, when she was just the quiet kid always sitting nearby, then what the hell am I supposed to do with that now?

And more than that...Does she still feel that way?

Because I'm not the same guy anymore. I've been hardened by loss and years of pretending I didn't care. I built walls around those memories and shoved them in a box I never opened.

But those words? Those damn words are what have had a hold on me all this time.

Not Sparrow's face. Not her laugh. Not even her damn betrayal.

It was those letters. And if they were Wren's...

I sit up slowly, heart pounding in a way that feels unfamiliar and dangerous.

I need to know the truth. I need to hear it from her lips, in her voice, so I can stop spinning circles in my head.

I need to know if the way I'm looking at her now, with all this heat, this want and something deeper, is something she might still feel too.

Because I brought her here to protect her. But now, lying in this bed with nothing but silence and old memories pressing in on me, I know that protecting her isn't going to

be enough.

Not if I want her. Not if she ever truly wanted me.

And God help me, I hope she still does.



### Chapter 6

#### Wren

After everything I've been through, waking up somewhere clean, warm, and quiet feels almost unreal.

I still brace myself every morning for Tim's footsteps or a slammed door, even though I know he's nowhere near. My mind doesn't trust in peace. It's always waiting for the next blow. That's the way my life has always been.

But Goose doesn't push or hover. He gives me the space that I crave so badly. He makes sure there's coffee in the mornings, and offers a ride when I need to run to town. He even fixed the squeaky hinge on the bedroom door without saying a word about it.

Still...things between us are tense. We're both too aware of each other now. Every look lingers a second longer than it should. Every brush of our hands when we pass in the hallway feels electric.

He doesn't touch me on purpose but I feel him in the air. In the rooms he just left. On the mug he hands me without meeting my eyes.

I find myself watching him when he's not looking, studying the curve of his shoulders under that worn leather cut, the way his jaw tightens when he's thinking, how his eyes soften just a little when he forgets to keep them guarded.

There are moments when I catch him staring back, but he always looks away too fast. Maybe it's all in my head, feelings that I thought I had buried long ago.

He keeps busy working on bikes out at the shop or doing small repairs on the cabins. I help where I can around his cabin by cleaning up, organizing things, and cooking when I know he's had a long day.

The first time I made dinner, he looked so startled you'd think I'd handed him a live grenade. Then he cleared his throat, muttered a quiet thanks, and devoured the whole plate.

We never eat together, though. He takes his into the living room while I stay at the kitchen table.

At night, I hear him pacing sometimes. Floorboards creak under his heavy boots, then stop suddenly, like he's changed his mind about something.

I don't ask. I don't open my door. Besides it's probably club business and I know that means he wouldn't tell me anything if I did ask.

And when I can't sleep at night, I write.

I dig out my notebooks and let the words pour out in the dark. Some of the pages are old poems I wrote years ago, when I was just the girl in the background, watching Goose fall in love with my sister. Thinking he never saw me. Others are newer pieces about survival and bruises that fade on the outside but stay buried in the skin.

Sometimes I wonder if he remembers those old notes Sparrow used to give him. If he knows they were never hers. If he's figured out they were mine.

I doubt it though as he's never mentioned it. Then again he's never seen me in that

way before even though I wish he did.

It's been a week since I started working at Bella's Brew. I didn't think I'd be good at it. Smiling at strangers, pretending everything is normal but there's something oddly comforting about the rhythm of it.

The hiss of the espresso machine combined by the sound of clinking cups. Bella's constant, cheerful hum as she flits around behind the counter like the queen of caffeine that she is.

The regulars have started to learn my name. Some ask about my coffee recommendations. Others just nod politely and leave generous tips. I'm still figuring out how to take a compliment without flinching.

I'm at the register taking an order from a guy in a construction vest, trying to remember if he's the one who drinks black coffee with a shot of hazelnut syrup or the one who likes peppermint in the summer like a psychopath, when something pulls my gaze to the front window.

Tim's across the street, half in the shadows of the corner store awning. Just standing there staring back at me. His arms are crossed, his jaw twitching the way it does when he's grinding his teeth after a binge.

His clothes are the same he wore the night he hit me outside the Blackcat and he's got this look in his eyes like he's thinking something through.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

I freeze mid-sentence. My pen is still in my hand. The guy in front of me clears his throat, and I mumble a distracted apology.

I finish taking his order, somehow remembering the difference between a mocha and a latte even though my brain is screaming.

I glance back toward the window just in time to see Tim take a step forward. But then he stops mid-stride.

The low rumble of motorcycle engines cuts through the air, growing louder by the second. I don't have to look to know it's the club. That deep, thunderous sound has become something of a comfort lately, even when I pretend otherwise.

Since I started working here, the club's made it a habit to drop in at random times. Torque comes in for lemon scones like he's addicted. Blood pretends to check on his wife, Miranda, who helps out in the mornings. Blade usually just tips his hat and watches everything without a word. And Goose...he comes less than the others, but when he does, I feel it for hours after he's gone.

They're not subtle. They're watching over me, whether I ask for it or not. And now, as the rumble of pipes rolls past the shop and echoes down Main Street, I see Tim hesitate.

His head jerks toward the sound, eyes narrowing. Then he slowly backs off, turns, and starts walking down the sidewalk like he wasn't just standing there trying to figure out how close he could get to the fire without burning.

I stare after him until he disappears from view. My heart's still hammering against my ribs and my hand shakes a little as I grab the next order slip.

Bella's voice calls from behind me, asking if I need help, and I shake my head quickly. "I'm good," I lie.

Because what am I supposed to say?

Hey, remember the ex who hit me? He was outside staring through the glass like I'm still his to claim. But it's fine. He left when the guys showed up.

It feels...stupid. He didn't do anything. He didn't come in. Didn't make a scene. Didn't touch me. Just stood there watching.

And maybe that's all it was. Maybe he just wanted to rattle me, remind me that he still exists, still knows where to find me. But I don't tell anyone. I don't want to make it a thing.

I go back to work, pretending nothing happened. Pretending the tremble in my hands is just caffeine. Pretending that seeing him didn't take something out of me.

Goose

I got in a little late tonight. Spent the whole damn day at the shop trying to fix a fuel line that fought me harder than a pissed-off rattlesnake.

My back aches, my hands are stained with grease, and I still smell like oil no matter how long I stood under the shower after getting home. But the hot water helped to take the edge off.

Now I'm out here on the front porch with the swing creaking gently under me as I

nurse a cold beer.

The night's quiet, and dark in that way only the deep woods can be. The stars are just starting to poke through the trees overhead. It's peaceful. So peaceful it almost hurts.

The screen door creaks open behind me. Her footsteps are soft but I'd know the rhythm of them anywhere. She's cautious, like she's trying not to disturb something. But there's no reason to be afraid here. Not with me.

Wren steps out with her arms folded across her chest in an oversized T-shirt brushing her thighs. Her hair's loose and curling around her shoulders. For just a second I wonder how it would look laid out across my pillow on my giant bed.

She looks sleepy, but I know she's up late every single night. From fear or something else, I don't know. But I don't want to be pushy and ask her.

"How was the shop today?" she asks, her voice quiet like the night around us.

I glance over, nodding once. "Long. Frustrating." I take another sip from the bottle. "Same old."

She moves to the steps and sits, tucking her knees close. Her bare feet rest on the worn wood of the porch. The porch light halos her in this warm glow, and for a second, I have to look away just to steady myself.

"Where'd you go after high school?" I ask. "You kind of vanished."

She shrugs, picking at the hem of her shirt. "I bounced around. Never really stayed anywhere long."

I nod slowly, the beer bottle cool against my palm.

“And Sparrow?” I ask, even though I hate the taste of her name in my mouth.

Wren’s shoulders shift. “Haven’t spoken to her in years.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

I look at her out of the corner of my eye. She's not bitter. She's not angry. She's just done. The kind of done that only comes after a thousand little betrayals.

"Didn't expect that. The two of you always seemed close," I say quietly.

Wren lets out a soft laugh, more exhale than amusement. "Yeah, well things aren't always as they seem. Life's funny that way."

We fall into silence for a little while, and it's not uncomfortable. It's like two people sitting on the edge of a memory, but not ready to jump into it yet.

She stands after a while, stretching her arms over her head, and I don't mean to notice how short her sleep shorts are but hell if I can help it. She's beautiful without even trying, and now that I see her, I can't unsee her.

She turns toward the door, her hand on the knob. And before I can stop myself, the words come out.

"I know the letters Sparrow used to give me weren't hers."

She freezes.

It hangs there between us, the weight of it thick in the air. I can hear the insects in the trees. The soft clink of the bottle as my grip tightens.

She doesn't turn around. Doesn't move. Just stands there, fingers curled around the doorframe.



Minutes pass, or maybe it's seconds that stretch too long.

Then I hear her soft voice that now seems impossibly sad. "Took you long enough."

She steps inside before I can say anything else. The door swings shut behind her with a soft thud, and a few seconds later, I hear her bedroom door close.

I stare at that door like it might swing open again, like she might come back out and say the rest of what I need to hear.

But she doesn't.

So I sit there on the porch swing with my beer forgotten in my hand.

And I whisper into the dark, "But is it too late?"

Wren

Back in my room, I shut the door gently behind me and lean against it for a long moment. My heart is pounding so loud I swear it echoes in the walls.

Goose finally knows the truth.

The words circle through my head like a storm: "I know the letters Sparrow used to give me weren't hers."

Took you long enough.

I said it like I was cool, like it didn't mean anything. But the second I got behind this door, the second I was out of his line of sight, I'm ready to crumble.

I press my fingertips to my lips, trying to hold something in. A laugh. A sob.

I don't even know which.

My eyes fall to my bag sitting under the window. The same worn-out canvas one I've carried with me through every shitty apartment, every bus ride, every escape.

The notebooks are in there, tucked safe between ratty sweaters and a pair of jeans with holes in the knees. The words he's been carrying around all these years. The words that were always mine.

I used to dream of this moment. Back when I was younger and still naïve. I imagined it happening so many times.

Him looking at me with that fire in his eyes, realizing he'd been in love with me all along. The way he'd rush over, gather me in his arms, tilt my chin up and kiss me like he'd been waiting for years. Like I was worth it.

And now...

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

Goose is here.He's in the same house.He's seen me.Not just with his eyes, but really seeing me.

Not as Sparrow's little sister.Not as the kid who scribbled in the margins of her notebook and never said what she felt out loud.

But me.The woman.The survivor.

And I can't stop the way my body responds just thinking about him.

The way his voice sounded in the dark.Deep and low, like he was finally speaking from a place he'd kept locked away.

The way his shoulders moved beneath that tight black tee he wears when he's relaxing, how his jaw flexed when he looked at me tonight with something I couldn't quite name.Want, maybe.Or maybe something deeper.

God, I want his hands on me.

The thought alone sends a shiver through me.Heat blooms low in my belly, spreading like wildfire.It's not just lust.It's everything.

All those years of wanting him from a distance.Of watching him smile at Sparrow with my words in his hand.

Of wishing I had the courage to step into the light and say, "It was always me.I wrote those.I loved you first."

I move to the bed, sitting on the edge, and run my hand over the blanket he gave me the first night I stayed here. It still smells faintly like him. Of clean soap, leather, and motor oil.

I want more. Not just his protection. Not just his pity.

I want his hands on my skin. His mouth on mine. His body pressing me into the mattress while I finally, finally, stop pretending I don't burn for him every time he walks into the room.

I press my knees together, exhaling a shaky breath as I try to get ahold of myself.

Just because he now knows those words were mine, doesn't mean he wants anything more from me.

## Chapter 7

Wren

It's been two weeks since that night on the porch. Since I finally let go of the weight I'd carried for so long, I dropped it in his lap with a single sentence.

Something shifted after that. Not in a loud, dramatic way. Just a subtle tilt in the air between us. A soft unraveling of years we'd spent pretending the other didn't exist beyond polite nods and buried memories.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

Now, every night after dinner, we end up in the same spot. Him on the porch swing and me curled up on the top step with a blanket around my shoulders with a cup of tea.

We talk a lot too. At first, it was safe topics. Old memories from high school, funny stories from club events, weird customers he's had at the shop.

Then slowly, it became more personal. He told me about the time Timber broke his hand punching out a guy who tried to short change Mina at a charity auction. I told him about the first time I ever left Montana and how terrified I was to sit on a Greyhound alone.

We laugh a lot. And it feels natural and easy. But underneath it, just below the surface, there's something else.

A tension that hums like electricity under my skin every time his eyes hold mine too long. Every time his voice dips low or he shifts just a little closer, his knee brushing mine like an accident that never quite feels like one.

It's not the same kind of tension we started with. That was guarded. Steeped in memories neither of us wanted to touch.

This? This is a hungry curiosity. An awareness. We're circling something neither of us has dared to name yet.

I think about it now as I drive the little beater Goose gave me to use when I don't want to take the bike into town.

The windows are rolled down, the warm summer air sweeping through my hair as I navigate the winding road past Wolf's Ridge and into the valley.

The trees blur by, the hum of the road soothing but my thoughts are anything but calm.

Because no matter how hard I try to focus on errands or the job, I can't stop thinking about that night two days ago.

I'd just come out of my room, heading toward the kitchen to get a bottle of water before crashing into bed. The house had been quiet, no TV, no music, just the hum of the fridge and the creak of old floorboards.

And then he stepped out of the bathroom just as I walked out into the hall. Just a towel slung low on his hips.

His chest was still damp, droplets clinging to the hard lines of muscle I'd never seen before.

Tattoos stretched across his shoulders and down his ribs, the ink dark against his skin. His hair was messy and wet, falling across his forehead. And those eyes...

God.

He looked up just as I froze in the hallway. For a second, neither of us said a word. My mouth went dry. My entire body lit up like a live wire.

He didn't even flinch. Just stared back at me like he was trying to decide if I was real or not.

Then he gave this half-smile—barely there, but it hit like a gut punch—and

murmured, “Didn’t expect to see you up.”

I think I nodded.Maybe I said something.I honestly don’t remember.I just remember standing there like an idiot as he passed me, close enough that the clean scent of soap and something purely him filled my lungs.

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since.

The way my body reacted.The way his eyes lingered, just for a second, before he disappeared into his room.

I don’t know what’s happening between us.I don’t know if he feels the same pull that’s starting to consume me.

But I know I feel it.I know I lie awake at night, just listening to the sounds of the house and wondering if he’s lying awake too, remembering the same damn moment.

Wondering if he thinks about what might happen if either of us were brave enough to take the next step.

The road curves, and I shift in my seat, focusing on the drive.But even the open road isn’t enough to chase the thought of him away.

Goose in nothing but a towel.

Goose watching me like he’s trying not to want something.

Goose sitting beside me in the dark, saying things I waited years to hear.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, biting my bottom lip.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

By the time I pull into the gravel lot in behind Bella's Brew, I've mostly gotten my head straight.

Mostly.

There's still a little voice whispering towel, tattoos, damp skin, but I shove it aside as I kill the engine and step out into the warm morning air. The bell over the door jingles as I push it open, the familiar scent of roasted beans and fresh cinnamon hits me instantly.

Bella's behind the counter, wiping down the espresso machine with her usual energy and flair. Her blonde hair tied up in a messy bun, and she's humming something soft under her breath.

Hayden is there too, Blade's wife, sorting pastries into the glass display case with her sleeves pushed up and a smudge of flour on her cheek.

"Wren!" Bella sings out when she sees me. "You're just in time for the last cinnamon apple muffin. I saved it. You're welcome."

I laugh as I walk up to the counter. "You're too good to me."

"Nah," she says with a wink. "I just know you get mean without sugar."

Hayden looks up and grins. "Morning, sunshine. Coffee?"

"Please," I say with a grateful sigh, leaning my hip against the counter. "Large. Extra



shot.It's a think-about-your-life-choices kind of day."

"Oh?"Bella arches a perfectly plucked brow as she starts working the espresso machine."That have anything to do with a certain broody biker you've been living with?"

I feel my cheeks flush instantly.Dammit.I try to cover it by fidgeting with the strap of my bag, but Hayden catches it too.Her smile grows.

"Wow," she says, laughing softly."Look at that blush.Wren, you're practically glowing."

"I am not," I mumble, though I can feel the heat crawling all the way up to my ears.

Bella just grins like a cat who's cornered a mouse."Honey, you could power the town with that blush."

I groan and bury my face in my hands."Why did I come in here again?"

"Because you need coffee and you like us," Hayden teases.

Bella leans her elbows on the counter and looks at me, all playful but with that knowing warmth in her eyes."So...how are things with Goose?"

I open my mouth, then close it.Then open it again."They're...good.I think.I mean, we talk a lot.Every night, really.It's nice."

"Nice," Bella repeats, clearly unconvinced.

"Okay, more than nice," I admit, cheeks still burning."It's different now.We're not avoiding each other like we were.He listens.He asks questions.He makes me laugh."

Hayden slides my coffee across the counter and adds quietly, “And you want to jump him every time he walks into the room, don’t you?”

I choke on air. “Hayden!”

She laughs outright and bumps her hip into Bella’s. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

I grab the coffee, trying to hide my grin behind the lid. “I hate both of you.”

Bella chuckles and leans in, resting her chin in her hand. “I always knew how you felt about him, Wren. Even when you were too scared to say it out loud.”

My heart stutters as my fingers tighten around the coffee cup.

Bella adds softly, “Maybe he’s finally starting to see it too.”

I swallow hard, emotions twisting in my chest. There’s hope there now, flickering where there used to only be fear. Maybe he is seeing it.

“Thanks,” I whisper. “For not laughing at me.”

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

Bella steps around the counter and pulls me into a hug. “Wren, no one in this building is laughing. Least of all Goose. That man looks at you like you hung the moon and doesn't even realize it.”

My breath catches, but I hug her back, heart thudding with something soft and terrifying.

Because the thought of Goose finally looking at me as a woman, means everything.

I say goodbye to Bella and Hayden with a smile that feels a little too big. My heart's still fluttering from Bella's words.

I tuck it away in the back of my mind like a secret. Something to pull out later when I'm alone and brave enough to really believe it.

The bell above the door jingles behind me as I step out into the sunlight. I squint up at the sky for a second, trying to remember what all I wanted to get from the grocery store before heading back to the cabin.

Just a few things. Coffee creamer, maybe some fruit. Something sweet to make up for the nerves still buzzing under my skin.

I don't even make it halfway across the lot before I feel a hand close around my arm. It's hard and bruising.

I gasp, instinct kicking in, but I don't get the chance to scream.

Tim's voice is a ragged snarl in my ear. "Get in the damn car."

Before I can react, he's slamming me into the seat of his car. My shoulder hits the door frame hard, and the world tilts from the pain of it.

I try to push back. Try to kick my leg out to stop the door from closing, but he's stronger than me. Always has been when he's like this. High. Wild. Sweating and shaking with fury at something only he can see.

The door slams shut like a prison cell. He's already behind the wheel before I can grab the handle to try and get out again. The lock clicks down instantly.

"Tim! What the hell are you doing?" I shout, panic climbing my throat as I bang my palm against the glass.

His head jerks around, eyes wide and glassy, darting like he's seeing ten things at once. None of them real.

He's grinding his teeth, muttering under his breath as he slams the car into drive and peels out of the parking lot so fast the tires squeal.

"Should've known you'd run to them," he snarls, hands tight on the wheel. "Should've known you'd go crying to your biker boyfriend like a little whore."

I flinch, curling into the corner of the seat, trying to stay out of reach.

"Tim. You need to pull over."

"I'm fine!" he barks, slamming his hand against the dashboard. "You think you can just leave me? After everything I've done for you?"

“You’ve done nothing for me,” I snap before I can stop myself, voice trembling with fury. “You’ve taken everything I ever had, and you’ve never...”

He whips around and backhands the headrest beside me, just missing my face. I recoil, heart hammering so fast it feels like it might burst through my ribs.

“You shut your f\*\*\*ing mouth.”

My fingers fumble for my phone, but it’s still in my purse. My purse, which I dropped when he grabbed me outside the coffee shop.

The car barrels down the back roads, heading away from town. Toward the old trailer. Toward isolation. Toward danger.

And the worst part?

No one knows I’m gone.

Goose

I’m elbow deep in the guts of a customer’s Harley, oil smeared on my forearms with a wrench in hand when I tighten a bolt a little too hard. Muttering a curse under my breath I take a step back wiping my hands on a rag.

I’ve tried to shake her out of my head all damn day. It’s not working. It hasn’t worked all week.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 pm*

She's everywhere. In my head, in my space, in that cabin like she's always belonged there. Like we've always been heading toward this version of us, and we were just too blind to see it before. Or rather, I was just too stupid to see the truth. That's what really rubs me raw.

I'm smiling to myself again, just thinking about last night. Sitting on the porch again, wrapped in quiet conversation under the stars.

She told me this story about a stray dog that followed her for three towns once, and how she tried to name it "Duke" but it only answered to "Pizza." I laughed harder than I have in years.

And that's the thing, I laugh around her. I feel lighter. Less like a guy dragging around old baggage that should have been forgotten years ago and more like someone who could be whole. If only he just stopped being a coward long enough to try.

I should've known it was her all along. Those letters...those damn notes I kept folded up like they were gospel. I thought Sparrow had this deep, poetic soul.

Turns out she was just a thief with good timing. And I was a fool for buying it.

But Wren? She meant every word when she wrote them.

And now I hear them in her voice. I see them in her eyes when she looks at me and doesn't even realize she's doing it. It's not just the words she wrote. It's who she is.

We like the same kind of music. She knows more about engines than I expected. She

drinks her coffee loaded with chocolate creamer, curses under her breath when she's frustrated, and watches old westerns like religion.

She makes me want to come home at night. She makes that empty ass cabin feel like something more than four walls and a bed I never used to sleep well in.

Wren fits. Not like a puzzle piece, more like a key in a lock I didn't know was still jammed shut.

I glance toward the garage bay doors, half expecting to see her drive up. It's late morning, and I know she was heading into town today for a few things.

Probably stopped by Bella's Brew first. She always does. The girls give her hell, but she lights up when she's around them. Belongs with them, just like she's starting to belong with us.

With me.

I drop the rag onto the bench and stretch my back, muscles pulling tight from hours bent over the bike. I think about checking my phone again. Just in case she texted.

Maybe she saw something at the store she thought I'd like. She does that now. Brings me dumb little things. Beef jerky, a new lighter, this one time it was a sticker of a duck wearing sunglasses. Said it "looked like me if I ever took a vacation."

I smile again. Can't help it. Then I glance at the clock.

She should've at least checked in by now.

It's probably nothing. But I know Wren. She's got this nervous habit of texting me updates even when she says she's "not the clingy type."

Usually something sarcastic or random; Saw a guy with a ferret on his shoulder. Tell me that's not a club prospect. Or Grocery store was out of creamer, the world is ending.

But there's nothing today. No buzz from my phone. No updates. No "On my way home" or "This lady at the bakery looks like Fang's grandma."

Nothing.

My smile fades. The wrench in my hand feels too heavy. And that little voice in my head, the one I've learned to listen to over the years, it starts whispering.

I'm just hanging the wrench back on the wall, still turning over the silence from Wren, when I hear the Prez's voice cut through the shop like a gunshot.

"Goose, we gotta go! Hayden saw that asshole shove Wren into his car!"

For a split second, I freeze as my brain struggles to process the words.

Then it hits.

Tim. That meth-head bastard.

I'm already moving, boots pounding across the concrete as I yank off my work gloves and toss them onto the bench.

My heart's slamming in my chest, loud enough I can barely hear the rest of what Timber's saying as he storms into the garage, Blade hot on his heels.



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“Hayden was walking back from Bella’s when she saw it,” Blade growls, already heading for the bay doors. “Said Wren didn’t even get a chance to scream. Just gone. Hauled her into his car and took off like his ass was on fire.”

“Which direction?” I snap, grabbing my cut from the hook near the office and shrugging it on with shaking hands.

“Out toward the edge of town, towards the old trailer,” Blade says, handing me my helmet. “Hayden called it in right away. Bella’s already trying to pull street cam footage, Snake’s on his laptop right now.”

I’m barely listening. My vision’s tunneled, red creeping in at the edges as I shove my helmet on and head for my bike like the devil’s on my heels.

That motherfucker laid hands on her again. He took her.

She trusted me. She let me take her in, gave me pieces of herself I know no one else has ever seen. And I didn’t protect her. I wasn’t there. I let her go to town alone.

“She said it was fast,” Prez says as we all mount up, his voice tight and deadly. “Didn’t see what direction after that. We’re splitting into pairs. Fan out. Check every back road and rundown trailer in a ten-mile radius. He’s hiding her somewhere.”

“What about the trailer they were staying at?” Butcher asks.

“He knows that’s the first place we’d look. I’m sending the prospects to check there

anyway, just to cover the bases.”Blade answers, looking over at me.

I nod once, not trusting myself to speak.

Because if I open my mouth now, I might just start screaming.Or swearing.Or promising to kill a man and mean every syllable of it.

I fire up my bike and the engine roars to life like it’s just as pissed off as I am.I peel out behind Prez, dust flying, Blade and the others right on our tail.

All I can think about is Wren’s face the last time I saw her.Smiling, blushing, teasing me about something dumb I said.She was starting to feel safe.Starting to believe she could have something good.

And now?Now she’s in that bastard’s hands again.

But not for long.Because I will find her.

And when I do, there won’t be enough of that piece of shit left to scrape off the pavement.

## Chapter 8

Wren

I stop struggling in my seat when I realize he didn’t turn towards the old trailer where we were living.

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The woods look different out here. The roads are narrower, more overgrown. I've never been this deep into the outskirts of this side of town before. Not even growing up.

There aren't even real driveways. Just ruts in the dirt, rusted-out mailboxes leaning at odd angles like broken teeth.

Panic claws its way up my throat as I sit up straighter, heart thudding so loud I can hear it over the rattle of his dying muffler.

I press my palm to the glass, watching the trees blur by, trying to memorize the turns, the bends, the way the light slants through the branches. If I make it out, when I make it out, I'll need to remember this.

He finally slows, the car lurching over potholes and gravel, pulling into the weedy lot of a rotting single-wide that looks like it's been condemned for a decade.

The sidings cracked and peeling. Windows boarded over with plywood and duct tape. The steps are gone, replaced by a piece of warped plywood propped against the threshold.

I barely get the door open before he grabs me by the hair. I scream and try to twist out of his grip, fingers clawing at his wrists, at the door frame, at anything. But he's too strong in that drug fueled way that doesn't care about consequences.

"Let me go!" I cry, kicking at the gravel as he drags me up the makeshift steps. "You're insane!"

“Shut the fuck up!” he roars, and when I fight harder, he punches me. A sharp, brutal crack across the face. The world goes white for a second. My ears ring and my knees buckle.

I feel warmth trickling down my cheek before I even register the pain. He splits my cheek open.

I’m barely conscious as he hauls me through the flimsy door and throws me onto a mattress. It smells like mold and piss.

My stomach rolls, but I force myself not to move, not to show weakness. I need my strength. I need my mind to stay clear.

He’s pacing now, muttering to himself, rubbing his arms like bugs are crawling on them. I can barely make out what he’s saying, but a few words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“Shouldn’t’ve left...got buyers on the way...teach you a damn lesson before the money gets here...”

My breath catches. Buyers?

“Selling my ass”—I think I hear. I pray I didn’t. But it makes too much sense, the way he’s moving, the way he keeps checking his phone, the wild glint in his eyes that says he’s not really here with me. Not anymore.

Tears sting, but I bite them back. Not like this. Not today.

Goose is out there. The club is out there. And if I know anything about them, it’s that they will come for me. I just need to try to keep calm until they do.

I try to use the hem of my shirt to wipe the blood from my eye, but it's smeared and sticky. My hands are shaking too badly to do much good. My cheek is throbbing in tune with my heart beat. My vision is blurry, and my heart is hammering so hard I can barely hear anything else. Until I do.

He's right next to me. Breathing hard. Too close. I glance over, hoping he's just pacing again, but no. I see him fumbling with his belt, mumbling something low and awful under his breath.

My blood turns to ice. I know what's coming.

Adrenaline kicks in, white-hot and blinding. I try to push myself up, but pain lances through my stomach as he kicks me with all his strength. The breath leaves my lungs in a gasp as I double over.

He's already on top of me before I can completely curl into myself. His weight presses me down and his hand grips my wrist like a vice.

"No!" I scream, thrashing, fighting with everything I have left in me. "Get off me! You sick bastard!"

He slaps me hard, but I don't stop yelling. I want the whole damn forest to hear me. Please let someone hear me. We struggle for what seems like forever but I know it's only minutes when there's a sound outside. A roar. Motorcycles coming close fast.

His head jerks toward the window, eyes going wide. He scrambles off me, stumbling like he's trying to figure out if he's hallucinating. I use the moment to roll off the mattress and crawl toward the wall, gasping for air.

Then, the front door explodes inward. And the Devil himself walks in and I feel like a huge weight lifts off of my shoulders. I can breathe a little easier.

His eyes are burning.Fists clenched.Shoulders shaking with rage.He sees me, and something in him seems to snap.

And this time?No one is stopping him.

Goose

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I don't even remember getting off the bike.

One second, we were tearing down the back roads like hounds on a scent. Snake had narrowed their location through traffic cams and a miracle of GPS guesswork.

The next, I was kicking the rotted door clean off its hinges, a scream still ringing in my ears.

Her scream. That sound will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The second I see her, crumpled on the floor with blood on her face, her shirt torn, everything inside me turns to rage.

He's standing in the middle of the trailer with his belt undone. His eyes are wide and his hands are in the air like that's going to save him.

I crash into him like a freight train, taking him to the floor with a force that rattles the trailer walls. My fists land without rhythm, without thought, just pure violent instinct. One after another. His face is slick with blood in seconds, and still it's not enough to settle the rage.

"Goose!" someone yells behind me, Blade or maybe Prez. I don't know, don't give a shit.

All I can see is Wren, broken and terrified, trying to crawl away. Him standing over her like she was nothing. Like she wasn't mine. Like she didn't matter.

I hear Prez shout again. “That’s enough! You’re gonna kill him!”

I feel two sets of arms grabbing me, hauling me off his limp body.

“Get Wren out of here,” Timber growls. “We’ll get this fucker ready.”

I look over at my girl. She’s still on the floor, curled in on herself, shaking. Blood trickles from her cheek.

Her eyes, Fuck, her eyes are wide and wild, locked on me like she’s not sure if I’m real. I tear free from Blade’s grip, stumbling to her side.

“Wren,” I breathe, voice raw. “I’ve got you now. You’re safe.”

She blinks at me once. Then again. And when she finally lets go, the sob that breaks out of her chest cuts deeper than any knife. I pull her into my arms, blood and all, holding her like I’ll never let go again.

Because I won’t. Not ever. Not after everything.

I carry her outside like she weighs nothing. She clings to me, tangling her fingers into my cut. Her breathing is ragged against my neck. Every now and then, her body shakes with a sob she’s too exhausted to hold back.

The air outside is cooler, cleaner, less foul than that goddamn trailer, but it doesn’t stop the knot in my gut from tightening.

Spotting a wide tree off to the side, I head in its direction. Its branches hang low and thick with leaves. It’s quiet, shaded and out of sight of the dump I just pulled her out of.



Walking over, I sink to the ground, sitting with her tucked into my lap. She draws her knees up, burying her head in my chest like she's trying to disappear. I wrap my arms around her and hold on like I might lose her again.

"You're safe now," I whisper into her hair. Over and over. "You're safe. I got you, Wren. I promise. He's not gonna touch you again. No one is. You're safe."

Her fingers twitch against my side and her body trembles as she cries quietly. Each sound like glass shattering inside my ribs.

I rest my chin on top of her head and close my eyes, just holding her while my fury sits just beneath my skin, a live wire humming for blood.

Eventually, she goes still. Her breathing slows. Too slow and I pull back just enough to look at her face.

"Wren?" I say softly, brushing her blood-matted hair back. "Hey, sweetheart, stay with me, alright?"

Her eyes flutter open at the sound of my voice, and she gives me the barest nod.

I kiss her forehead gently, careful not to startle her, then pull her close again. Rocking us both under that tree while the rest of the world fades.

It's a while before I hear the door to the trailer creak open behind me. Prez steps out, his face grim. He glances our way, jaw tightening when he sees Wren in my arms.

He walks over slowly, stopping a few feet away.

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“The prospects are on the way,” he says quietly. “Two cages. One to take you both back to your cabin.”

I nod, not letting go of her. My voice is gravel when I speak.

“And the other?”

His eyes harden. “For him.”

Good.

I don’t say anything else. There’s nothing more to say. I just hold Wren tighter and wait for the sound of engines in the distance, hoping she can feel it. That she’s not alone anymore.

Wren

My crying finally stops, though my chest still trembles from the aftershocks. I don’t move from my spot in Goose’s lap. I don’t want to.

His arms are like a shield wrapped around me, keeping everything dark and cruel out. I feel...safe. For the first time in a long time.

Like maybe I belong somewhere. Like maybe I’ve always belonged right here.

The distant sound of engines drifts toward us, tires crunching on gravel. I flinch without meaning to but Goose tightens his grip, murmuring something too low for me

to hear.Doesn't matter.The way he says it, the way he holds me...I know I'm okay.

Timber walks out of the busted trailer a second later, brushing dirt from his hands, face unreadable.

"You need Doc to meet you at the cabin, sweetheart?"he asks gently."We can have him there in twenty."

Before Goose can answer for me, I lift my head from his chest, wiping at my face with a shaky hand.My voice comes out raw but steady.

"No," I say, looking straight at him."I don't need Doc.I just need a shower.I need the stench of him and that trailer off me."

Timber nods once with respect.

I start to shift, pushing up with sore arms and legs.Goose immediately tries to stop me, his hands on my waist like I'll break if I move wrong.

"Wren...wait..."

"I'm okay," I whisper, giving him a faint smile."I can walk."

He doesn't look convinced.But after a beat, he lets his hands fall and rises to his own feet.He stands close in case I sway or stumble.Straightening my spine, I plant my feet on solid ground.It hurts, but I don't show it.I won't.

Because I'm not broken.Not anymore.

I feel his hand lightly rest on my back as we turn toward the approaching cars.I heard when Timber said that one is for me and Goose.The other...the one for Tim...I don't

even want to look.

Let them deal with him.

Goose falls into step beside me, silent but solid. As we stand there together waiting for the car that will take us home, I realize this isn't just about survival anymore. It's about starting over.

We turn towards the sound when the cars finally come into view. Relief surges through me like a wave. I take a step forward, ready to get in and never look back until Timber's voice slices through the quiet like a blade.

"Goose, who the fuck is that?"

I freeze. His tone isn't casual. It's tight and suspicious.

A second later, he lets out a loud, sharp whistle. The kind of whistle that means something's wrong.

Goose steps in front of me instantly, blocking my body with his. His hand drops to the small of my back, gently but firmly urging me backward, toward the tree line.

I turn my eyes to the road just as the vehicles roll to a slow stop. They're not club vehicles. They're sleek, dark, and too small. The club likes their jeeps and SUVs. These little cars are too expensive for these roads.

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The doors open and men in dark suits step out first. Each of them carrying weapons they don't bother to hide. Sidearms with silencers strapped to thighs.

These are professional, cold blooded killers. They almost remind me of Fiona's husband, Baratta.

Goose mutters a curse under his breath.

Then the back door of the lead car opens, and a man steps out slowly, like he's got all the time in the world.

He's not like the others. He's polished. Well dressed in a black tailored suit. Every strand of hair in place, not a wrinkle or speck of dust on his shiny Italian shoes. A smirk curls his lips as he surveys the scene, hands clasped casually behind his back.

And his eyes land on me.

I start to shake.

"No," I whisper. "No, no, no..."

I remember now.

What Tim said.

"They'll be here soon. You think you can just leave? Nah, baby. I got buyers."

My knees nearly give out. These men, this man, he's one of them. One of the buyers. They weren't just words. They weren't empty threats. He was going to sell me.

Goose catches my arm, steadying me, his jaw clenched tight. The rest of the club is suddenly there, pouring out from behind the trailer like a silent wave. They fan out around us, each one stone-faced, armed and ready.

Timber steps up beside us, expression dark as thunderclouds. His voice is low, lethal.

"You're trespassing."

The well-dressed man stops ten feet away, raising an eyebrow. "I was told my product would be here. As well as something a little extra."

Goose lunges forward before I can react, but Timber's hand shoots out, catching him mid-step. "Not yet," he growls under his breath.

The stranger doesn't flinch. He just smiles wider, eyes flicking to me again. "My associate promised she was prepped and ready. I paid for quality."

The ground shifts beneath me. The blood drains from my face.

Goose is going to kill him.

And honestly?

I hope he does.

Goose

My fists are already clenched so tight I can feel my nails biting into my palms. One

wrong move, just one, and I'll end that smug bastard where he stands. I don't care how many guns he's got behind him. I'll die standing if it means keeping Wren safe from what he came here to do.

But then I glance at Timber.

Our Prez doesn't move right away. He's standing like stone, arms folded, eyes locked on the guy like he's running every possible outcome through his head. He's trying to keep things from blowing up. We were not expecting this turn of events. But the fire's right there in his eyes, just under the surface.

Finally, he speaks. His voice calm, cold and deadly.

"We found your shit," Timber says, voice like steel. "Stashed in the trailer. If you're here for the drugs, you're welcome to take 'em. But the girl?" He tips his chin toward Wren, standing behind me, trying to stay upright. "She ain't going anywhere with you. She's an old lady in the Wolfsbane MC. Protected."

The man's eyes cut to Wren again, and I feel her flinch behind me. He doesn't leer, doesn't smile. He just measures her, like she's some goddamn piece of property.

I nearly lose it. Timber shoots me a warning glance without even turning his head.

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The bastard looks back at him, gives a slight nod like he's just been informed the price of steak at a fancy restaurant and decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

Prez motions to Blood and Torque.

The guys disappear into the trailer and return a minute later carrying two duffel bags stuffed full of what I know is meth and whatever the hell else Tim was dealing in. They walk right up and drop the bags at the man's polished leather shoes like garbage left on the curb.

His goons immediately step forward, unzip them and check the contents. One gives a small nod, and the well-dressed man turns back toward his car.

But Timber isn't finished.

"This is the only warning I'm gonna give you," he says, voice raised now, loud enough to carry across the trees. "Stay the fuck out of White Summer. This is our town. You send drugs through here again, we won't be polite next time. We'll burn your whole operation to the goddamn ground."

The man pauses. His lip curls just a little. Like he wants to laugh but knows better. He doesn't say a word. Just slides into the back seat of his car.

The doors slam shut, and the convoy pulls away in silence. Black tires spitting gravel as they disappear down the road just as our own SUVs come into view.

For a long moment, no one says anything.



Just the sound of Wren breathing behind me. I turn to look at her. Her face is pale. She's shaking again, though she's trying to hide it. She meets my eyes, and there's still fear there, but something else too. Strength.

Prez walks up behind me and claps a hand on my shoulder.

"Get her out of here," he says quietly. "Take her home, Goose. We got the rest."

## Chapter 9

Wren

The ride back to the cabin is mostly a blur. I don't remember getting into the truck. I don't remember the winding turns of the road or the way the trees blurred past us in the fading light. What I do remember is Goose's hand on mine. The way he never let go.

Even now, as he helps me into the bathroom of his cabin, his touch is steady. Careful. Like he's afraid I'll shatter if he moves too fast.

I lower myself onto the closed toilet lid, sore everywhere, my body buzzing with exhaustion and pain.

My hands are scraped and raw, my stomach aching from where Tim kicked me. My cheek pulses with a dull throb, and I know the bruises are only just beginning to show.

He kneels down in front of me without a word, a towel draped over his shoulder and a bowl of warm water in his hands. He sets it on the floor beside him and dips a washcloth into it, wringing it out slowly.

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His eyes flick up to mine, asking for permission without saying it.

I nod once.

And then his hands are on me. Gentle and steady. The complete opposite of the ones that hurt me.

He wipes the blood from my cheek with slow, careful strokes, like I'm something breakable. Like I matter.

"You don't have to do this," I whisper, not because I don't want him to but because it's hard to believe anyone would.

His eyes lift to mine, intense and quiet. "Yes, I do."

The cloth moves down to the cut on my lip, then across the bruises on my collarbone. He never asks what happened in that trailer.

But I can feel it in the way his jaw is clenched, the way his eyes darken with every mark he uncovers.

He rinses the cloth again, his hands shaking just slightly. I reach out without thinking and lay my fingers on his wrist.

"Goose," I whisper. "I'm okay now."

He lets out a breath like he's been holding it for hours.

“No,” he says. “You’re not. But you will be. I swear it.”

A tear slips down my cheek, but it’s not from pain this time. It’s from something that feels dangerously close to hope.

When he’s finished cleaning me up, he gently dries my skin with a soft towel, then lifts my chin with two fingers.

When he reaches for the hem of my shirt, my first reaction is to flinch. My hands shoot out, grabbing his wrists, and my breath catching hard in my throat.

The echo of Tim’s hands, his roughness, his violence, burns too fresh in my memory. Goose freezes the moment I react, his eyes lifting to mine with nothing but patience and something like pain.

“I won’t hurt you,” he says softly. “Not ever.”

I already know that. Deep down, I do. But my body’s still wired with fear at the moment. My instincts trained to brace for the worst. I force myself to nod, even as my heart races.

He doesn’t rush me. He just waits, warm hands steady, eyes locked on mine like I’m the only thing that matters in the world. After a long moment, I let go of his wrists and lift my arms.

He carefully removes my shirt, his touch slow and reverent, not like he’s undressing me, but like he’s unburdening me.

He helps me out of the rest of my clothes, then reaches into the shower to start the water, checking the temperature before turning back to me. I don’t look at myself in the mirror. I already know what I’ll see. Bruises, cuts, shadows that don’t fade.

He steps into the shower first, then holds out a hand to me.

The warm water rushes over us, and for a moment I just stand there, breathing. Letting it rinse away the last several hours. The last few years.

He's quiet as he grabs a washcloth, lathering soap with calm, deliberate movements before bringing it to my skin. His touch is more than gentle. Every stroke is soft, careful, almost like an apology he doesn't know how to say out loud.

He washes the dried blood from my arms, then my shoulders and my back. His fingers graze across every bruise like he wants to memorize them, like he wishes he could take them from me and wear them himself.

And something in me shifts.

Under the warm water, under his hands, I start to feel again. Not fear. Not numbness.

But want.

My body reacts before my brain catches up. My breath hitches, heat curling low in my belly as his hands glide across my stomach, the sides of my hips. I don't move away.

I don't want to.

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He seems to sense it too. His breath falters. He pauses for the briefest second as his hand lingers at my waist. But he doesn't push.

He just finishes rinsing the soap away, his movements tender until the last drop of suds is gone. Then he turns off the water and grabs a towel.

Without a word, he wraps it around me, tucking me into it like I'm something fragile...something precious.

He pats my skin dry, not lingering, not taking advantage. It's a type of caring that I'm not used to. And maybe that's what breaks me open the most.

He starts to turn, to leave and give me space. But my hand shoots out before I can stop myself, fingers wrapping around his wrist.

He looks back at me, eyes wide and searching.

My voice is barely above a whisper. "Stay".

His eyes search mine deeply for an impossibly long moment. I'm almost afraid he's going to walk away but instead he turns back to me, gently cupping my cheek.

He leans in slowly giving me plenty of time to change my mind but I know that I won't. I've waited for this moment for years and I plan to enjoy every minute of it.

His lips take mine softly at first. Heat ignites in my core and I push myself into him. The heat of his body seeps through his wet clothes into my skin. My arms reach

up to pull him closer and yet he still holds back.

Breaking our kiss, I lean back to look into his eyes. I want him to see the want in my own.

“Please, Goose. Even if it's just this once.” I plead, still not yet convinced of his feelings for me.

His eyes take on a hard edge to them.

“You really think it'll just be once with us?” He almost growls. “Once I claim you fully, you are mine forever. I'll never let you leave me. I fell in love with you through letters even though I didn't know it was you. I know you and I know that you know me as well.”

“Then you do want me...” I whisper.

He reaches for my hand, pulling it to the front of his jeans. I feel his hard length behind his zipper. It almost feels as though it's throbbing.

“Is that even a question?” He grins. “But you are hurt. Your ribs are bruised.” His eyes look down at my side. “It'll be worse tomorrow.”

“I don't care. I need this right now.” I say, unable to say exactly why I need it. Why I need his touch to replace everything I've ever felt.

He must see something in my eyes as he gives a sharp nod and then leads me into his bedroom. His bed is massive with dark colored sheets.

“Lay down on the bed.” He says gently. “You need to heal before I fuck you so hard you never remember where you start and I end. But for now, I'm going to make you

scream my name.”

I almost grin at the thought but his hands on my thighs as he spreads my legs make my breath catch in my throat. My core is completely exposed to his eyes, eyes that are looking at my wetness like a starving animal.

“Fuck! I’ve thought of nothing but this for two damn weeks.”

I open my mouth to say something but I stop breathing as he gives no warning before his entire mouth covers me. My hands grab his head as heat spreads to all of my limbs. My breathing comes in ragged gasps as I feel an orgasm building quickly.

I’m lost to everything except the sensations he’s pulling from me and my breathing in the quiet room around us.

My hips try to move closer but he holds me still with one arm. I’m so close now, throbbing in my center when I feel his finger enter me slowly at first.

He pumps into me several times then curls his digit slightly upward and I explode. Screaming out deliriously.

I feel him stand up from the bed and I open my eyes to see him peeling off his wet clothes. My eyes roam his entire body. Every inch of skin as he strips. My mouth still waters from the sight of him.

He gets into bed next to me, pulling the covers over us both before pulling me into his arms. Turning to look at him, he kisses my mouth once again.

“Get some sleep.” He whispers.

I snuggle into the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent as I drift off from

exhaustion.



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Goose

I lay next to her in the dark, the sound of her breathing slowly evening out until it settles into a soft rhythm.

One of her hands is resting against my chest, her fingers curled lightly into my skin like she's afraid I'll vanish if she lets go.

I don't move. Not until I know she's completely asleep.

When I finally shift, it's careful, like easing away from the most delicate thing I've ever held. I brush my lips against her forehead, just above the bruise.

A kiss meant for peace. For promises I haven't spoken yet.

Then I slide out of the bed and stand in the darkness for a moment, watching her. She looks so small under the covers. So fragile. But I know better now.

Wren isn't just bruised and hurt. She's surviving. She fought. And I'll make damn sure no one ever lays a hand on her again.

I get fully dressed, my body still wound tight, rage simmering just beneath my skin. There's one more thing I have to do tonight, and I won't be able to rest until I do.

I head into the kitchen and pull out my burner. I don't text. This needs a voice. I need someone I trust.

Fiona answers on the second ring. “Goose?”

“I need you to come stay with Wren,” I say quietly. “Now.”

There’s a pause. Then, “She okay?”

“She’s sleeping. But yeah. She’s safe now.”

Fiona doesn’t ask more questions. She grew up in this life and knows the way of things. “We’ll be there in ten.”

I end the call and walk back down the hallway stopping at the door of the bedroom, one shoulder resting against the frame.

She’s still curled on her side, that same soft rhythm of breathing lulling the room into quiet. I watch her for a long moment. Everything in me tightens.

Now I’m going to make sure he never has the chance to do this again.

Headlights sweep across the walls of the cabin as a vehicle pulls up the drive. I don’t need to look. I know it’s Fiona and Baratta.

I meet them on the porch. Baratta being the huge quiet type just nods and walks over to the swing, taking a seat.

“Go do what you have to do. We’ll take care of her until you get back.” Fiona says.

“Thanks.” I answer, heading to my bike.

The ride to the clubhouse feels different tonight. My bike rumbles beneath me, steady and familiar, but there’s a darkness riding with me that wasn’t there before.

The wind bites against my skin, the night air sharp and heavy with the weight of what I'm about to do.

By the time I pull into the lot, a few of the brothers are already waiting. It's more than personal. It's club business.

I cut the engine and climb off the bike. Timber, Blade, and Blood are standing by the doors. Torque leans against the wall nearby, arms crossed over his chest, watching me with that unspoken question in his eyes.

"You sure you want to do this tonight?" Timber asks when I reach him.

I look him square in the eye. "I'm not sure I can't."

He nods once, no judgment there. Just understanding. A brother who's been in the same place more than once.

"He's inside," Blade nods to the building behind him. "Woke up swinging, tried to bite Ringo, so we tied him to the damn chair."

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“Used your old chain,” Blood says with a grim smile. “Figured it was fitting.”

I walk past the firepit and the line of parked bikes, and into the darkness behind the clubhouse where the old tool shed sits. The place we use when someone needs a reminder of what crossing Wolfsbane MC costs.

The lock clicks open in my hand, and I pull the door wide, stepping inside.

He’s in there, just like they said. The place smells like bleach from the last time we used it. Normal. Comforting, even.

Tied to a chair with one arm already bleeding from where he struggled against the chain. His shirt's half torn, and his lip's split from the beat down the boys gave him before dragging him here.

He looks up when I step inside. His eyes are wild and face pale.

“You can’t...” he starts.

I shut the door behind me with a click.

“Don’t even try,” I growl. “You lost the right to speak when you touched her.”

He squirms. “You don’t understand, man, she was mine...”

I slam my fist into the wall beside his head, not touching him yet, just needing the impact to keep myself from doing worse too fast.

“She was never yours,” I snarl. “You broke her. You tried to sell her. You laid your hands on her. And you think you’re gonna walk away from that?”

He laughs, jittery, broken. “You ain’t a cop. You got no proof. You kill me, they’ll come looking.”

I crouch in front of him, meeting his bloodshot eyes.

“I don’t need proof, Tim. I don’t need permission. And no one’s coming for you. You’re a junkie who disappeared after screwing with the wrong people. No one gives a damn where you end up.”

His face pales even more. I stand and roll my shoulders.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen,” I say, voice low and steady, even though the rage is pounding in my chest. “You’re going to feel a piece of what you gave her. And then, you’re going to disappear. Like liquid down a drain. Literally.”

I grab the chain from the wall with a grin. I don’t feel guilty for what I’m about to do. I feel righteous. Because Wren deserves peace. And I’m going to give it to her. For the rest of our lives...after I kill this mother fucker.

Chapter 10

## Page 40

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Butcher (Road Captain)

The scent of smoked ribs and grilled chicken fills the air, mixing with the sounds of laughter and the occasional bark of one of Ringo's damn dogs chasing after a stick.

It's one of those golden afternoons where the world feels still, like maybe for once, we can all pretend there's no blood under our boots and no ghosts in the shadows.

I lean against the back fence, a cold beer in one hand and a plate of food in the other, though I haven't touched a bite. I'm too busy watching everyone else.

Goose and Wren are sitting together at one of the picnic tables, and I can't help but smile around the neck of my beer bottle as I lift it for a drink.

Those two...hell, they've come a long way.

Back in the day, Goose was all tangled up over Sparrow, blind as shit to the quiet little shadow that trailed behind her.

Wren always kept her head down, but anyone with eyes could see the way she watched him. Like he hung the moon. I used to think she'd grow out of it.

Guess she never did.

But Goose? He sure as hell grew into it. He's different now. Softer around her, like she's the only thing that can reach the parts of him he kept locked away for years.

They're laughing now, heads bent close, and it hits me just how far they've come. What they went through. What she survived.

And damn, does it make the beer taste a little sweeter.

I scan the yard and see everyone paired off. Timber and Mina laughing with Bella and Blade. Torque's got Jesse in his lap, flicking at her ear while she fake glares at him.

Even Snake and Andi are here, sharing some complicated tech story that only they could give a damn about.

And then there's me.

Oldest mother fucker in the MC. Mid forties and never been married. Never even came close.

Used to think that made me lucky.

Now?

Hell...maybe I missed out.

"Thought I smelled brooding," Blade says, sidling up beside me and offering a fresh beer. I swap him bottles with a nod, then clink necks.

"Not brooding," I say. "Just observing."

Blade laughs. "That's what old guys say when they're brooding."

I grunt, because he's not wrong. "You think Prez believes that prick who showed up for Wren was part of the same shit we've been hearing about around town?"

Blade's smile fades, just a little. He glances toward the back of the yard where Timber is talking to Blood and Bear, his face unreadable.

"He's thinking about it," Blade says. "Hasn't said it out loud, but I can see the wheels turning."

"Yeah," I mutter, watching Goose tug Wren closer like she's gravity and he's done trying to fight it. "Something tells me that wasn't a one off. That kind of business doesn't knock on your door by accident."

Blade nods slowly. "Tim might've been the entry point. But the pipeline's still open. And I don't think they're done sniffing around White Summer."

My grip tightens on the beer bottle. "We got families now. Wives. Kids. They come for us, we're ready. But they come for them..."

Blade's jaw ticks. "Then they burn."

I nod. "Damn right they do."



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We stand there in silence for a long moment, just two old warriors watching a field full of love, laughter, and leather vests. There's peace today but it's the kind that sits on top of a loaded gun.

I take another swig of my beer.

Yeah. Let 'em come.

We'll be ready.

I take a long pull from my beer, then glance back toward the far edge of the yard where the prospects are setting up a second table under the trees. All six of 'em. They're laughing, giving each other shit like usual but they're watching, too. Always watching. Waiting for their turn.

"Hard to believe it's been two years," I say, nodding toward the group. "Think Prez is gonna patch any of 'em in soon?"

Blade follows my gaze, his face unreadable for a second. Then he exhales through his nose and gives a small shrug.

"He did mention it last week," he says. "We've been watching real close this last six months. They've put in the hours, done the dirt. They've bled for us. All six have stood tall."

I nod slowly. "Slick, Bones, Cutter, Tex, Pyro, and Roach. They're solid. Don't mouth off. Do what they're told. Watch each other's backs."

“Tex took a knife for Timber,” Blade says. “Didn’t even hesitate.”

“I saw that,” I mutter, jaw tight. “Not many men would have stepped in the way like that. Especially not for someone who still calls you a prospect.”

Blade nods. “They’ve earned it. All six.”

I glance back at the younger guys, kids, really, compared to me. Hell, I’ve got boots older than Slick. But they’ve put in the work, and they haven’t broken.

“You remember your patch night?” I ask, almost absently.

Blade grins. “How could I forget? Blood made me puke from nerves. Kept tellin’ me they were gonna beat my ass before I got it. I half believed him.”

I chuckle. “They told me I was gettin’ kicked out. That they’d had enough of my ‘loud mouth and ugly mug.’ I was halfway through tellin’ ’em to go to hell when Timber tossed me the cut.”

We both laugh for a second, quiet and low. Then Blade gets serious again.

“We’re gonna vote next week,” he says. “Prez wants every officer’s opinion. Probably announce it at church after that.”

I nod slowly, eyes still on the group. Cutter notices me watching and straightens up a little. The others glance our way too. They’ve learned the rules. When to talk. When to shut up.

“I hope they’re ready,” I say. “Because after the shit with Tim and that suit with the goons? We’re gonna need every set of loyal hands we can get. Club needs to be airtight.”

Blade nods. "They'll be ready. And they'll be ours."

I drain the rest of my beer, then grin faintly.

"Guess I better start remembering birthdays and buy some damn cigars. Looks like we're about to have six more brothers."

I pop the cap off another beer and take a long swig, the burn rolling down smooth as Blade keeps talking beside me. But then my attention shifts. Something cuts through the laughter.

A woman I've never seen before walks into the yard. She's not flashy. But she carries herself like she belongs, shoulders squared, head high, eyes scanning the crowd like she's been here before.

She heads straight toward Pyro, one of the prospects. He sees her and his whole face lights up with something damn near like pride. Pulls her into a tight hug before they start talking close and quiet. Family stuff no doubt.

"Who's that?" I ask Blade, nodding toward the pair.

Blade glances over and nods like he already knew I'd ask. "That's Pyro's sister. Her name's Brenna."

Brenna. I roll the name around in my mind for no reason I want to admit just yet.

"She looks a little older than Pyro," I say.

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Blade nods. "She is. Mid-thirties, I think. Her husband served overseas. Army. Died about five years back. She's been raising their little boy on her own since. Kid's about Hawk and Luna's age."

Hawk and Luna, Timber and Mina's kids, are running through the grass nearby and laughing like the world has no monsters in it.

I think about a woman raising a kid on her own. About what it costs to hold everything together after losing someone.

Then I look back at her. And it's like she feels it. My gaze. Her head lifts slightly, the corners of her mouth still turned up in that half smile she's giving Pyro. But then her eyes shift and land right on me.

And just like that, the world tilts a little.

It's not like in the movies. No slow motion, no music swelling but it hits. Something electric. Some current that buzzes under my skin and makes the noise of the barbecue fade into the background.

She doesn't look away. Not for a solid few seconds. Not until the edges of her smile pull tight like maybe she doesn't know what to do with whatever's passing between us either.

Then she turns, says something to Pyro and walks back the way she came.

I watch her go, jaw tight, trying to make sense of the strange knot in my chest.

It's been a long damn time since a woman turned my head. Hell, I'd convinced myself that part of me was just burned out, used up on one-night stands and old regrets.

I've lived most of my life in this club, watched brothers fall in love, settle down, have kids. Always figured I just wasn't built for that kind of thing.

But now?

Now I'm wondering what it might feel like to let someone in. To want to.

I don't say anything to Blade, just finish my beer and glance once more at the spot where she disappeared around the clubhouse.

I've got no idea what just happened.

But I've got a feeling I'll be seeing her again.

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The End...For Now...