



Falcon (Grim Road MC #7)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: It's all fun and games until my ex shows up from the dead.

Gina: For over a year I've lived in fear, a monster terrorizing me within the gates of the Grim Road MC compound. The club took care of the physical problem, but demons still ride me hard. I've learned to trust the people I interact with on a daily basis, I'm still too anxious to explore the compound unless I'm with one of the old ladies or Lemon. Or Falcon... He always seems to be there when the fear threatens to swallow me whole. He's protective and caring, and he takes me for rides on his Harley. Which he had painted pink because he found out I wanted to ride a pink bike. How many men in a motorcycle club did that?

Falcon: What happened to Gina at the hands Grim Road, myself included, is something that will haunt me for the rest of my life. My only chance at redemption is to help her heal and feel safe again. I'm too old for her, but I can't seem to care. I want to protect her, but I'm watching her to an unhealthy degree, waiting for the times she needs someone to bring her back to reality and assure her she's safe. Until the day she invites me inside her sanctuary without a chaperone. I'd never take advantage of Gina. Not intentionally. Then again, I never expected my ex fiancé to come back from the dead.

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Falcon

The soft cry coming from Gina's bedroom window damned near broke my heart. She did fine most days, when she had the girls to distract her. But at night, when she was alone in that house, nightmares visited her regularly. Those nightmares were partly my fault and that was why I couldn't let go of this need to see she was safe. Which is why I was currently sitting underneath her open window outside her house. At one in the morning.

Yeah. That wasn't creepy or anything. Thank God she still stayed in the compound. I knew she wasn't really comfortable here, but she had nowhere else to go. Though she typically stayed in her house or in the fenced-in backyard, she would very occasionally leave the compound to grocery shop or whatever. She never went anywhere inside the compound by herself other than to drive from her house to the main gate and back.

Another soft cry followed by a small sob echoed in the night. It was a scared, lonely sound, much like that of a child lost from its parents in a crowd. Among the myriad night noises in the wildlife reserve where our compound was nestled, she sounded like a caged animal too scared to fight.

With a shake of my head, I dug my phone out from my back pocket and moved away from the window slightly behind a shrub and called her. When I heard her phone play a trilling notification, I moved farther away so she couldn't hear me speaking through her open window. She answered on the fourth ring.

"H-hello?"

“Hey, Gina. I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“I -- no. You didn’t. Falcon?”

“Yeah. Probably shoulda led with that, huh?” I tried to make fun of myself to distract her. I knew from months of watching over her and listening to her nightmares she was always shaken when she woke.

“Sorry. I should have checked to see who was calling before I answered.” She sounded a little more awake and even managed a small laugh.

“I’m really sorry. I thought I saw your light on and thought something might be wrong. About the time you answered, I realized it was Rocket and Lemon’s place.”

There was a short pause and I thought I heard her shuffling around. Maybe sliding the covers from her body so she could sit on the edge of the bed. And, Goddamn, that image needed to stay the fuck outta my head!

“You were... checking on me?”

“Well, yeah.” I hoped I sounded sheepish and embarrassed but I wasn’t that great an actor. But if it pulled her out of her nightmares, I’d suffer through it. Gladly. “I guess I was.”

She took in a shuddering breath before speaking again. “Because of what happened?”

I had to be careful about my answer here. I didn’t want her thinking I felt obligated to look after her, but I didn’t want to scare her either. God knew she had plenty of reasons to be scared of me.

“Because you need someone looking after you and I kind of enjoy the job.”

“You don’t have to, you know. I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will. You’re strong. You need time to heal and to learn to trust yourself again.”

“I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“Why not? What should I have said?” I kept my voice neutral and conversational. I wanted her to keep talking so she could settle her mind. I always managed to find a way to get through to her when she had a nightmare. I don’t know if she suspected I was watching her or not, but whenever I’d hear her crying or calling out in fear, I’d send a text. Or knock on her door. Or call. If she’d noticed the timing, she hadn’t said anything. Positive or negative.

“I thought you’d tell me I’d have to learn to trust you. Why would you think I didn’t trust myself?”

I had to smile. I’d led her straight where I wanted her to go and she’d done so without hesitation. “Because you already trust everyone in this club. What you don’t trust is your own judgment telling you to trust us.”

She was silent so long I thought I might have overplayed my hand. Then her soft voice asked, “How do you know I trust you?”

“Because, when Rocket and Lemon said the club would pay for a place outside the compound if you wanted to get away from us, you declined.”

“Yeah,” she said on a sigh. “I suppose you’re right. I just couldn’t stand the thought of being out on my own again. I was obviously not very good on my own the first time.”

“That wasn’t your fault, Gina. Once he got you back here, it was easy for him to make you feel like you didn’t have a choice. You know better now and you choose to stay.”

“I never really thought about it that way. I couldn’t get past having to be on my own. And Lemon... well...”

“What about her? You know she’s solidly in your corner. Right?”

“That’s just it, Falcon. I do know. She didn’t make excuses for anyone. She didn’t doubt anything I told her. She believed everything and I was quick to tell her you guys thought I was willing when... you know... when you...” Even now she couldn’t say it, and I wanted to claw out my own heart.

“Yeah, honey. I know. We’re all ashamed of that, even if we didn’t know. We could have taken the time to talk to you more. Or at all, really.” I gave a self-deprecating snort of laughter. “More importantly, we could have made sure you knew you weren’t in danger from any of us. All you had to do was tell someone you wanted away from Hammer and we’d have removed you from the situation and asked questions later. We didn’t make it clear so that’s on us.”

“I guess,” she said softly. “Seems like both of us were victims of Hammer’s deception.”

“I’d say that’s a fair statement.”

I heard sounds on her end as she moved from her bedroom. I heard a door open, then close. Moments later, the light in her living room came on.

“You said you saw a light. That you thought it was mine.” She sounded better now. More herself. Though I hated that she’d donned the air of indifference she hid behind,

I was glad that, at least subconsciously, she'd trusted me enough to tell me what she had.

"Yeah. I did."

"Are you close by, then?"

"Yeah. Just outside." Not a lie.

"Um, would you, uh..." She cleared her throat. "Would you like some coffee?"

"You good with me being in your space without one of the women nearby?"

"I think so." Her voice said she was trying to convince herself she could do this and wasn't doing a very good job. "You'd leave if I got overwhelmed. Right?"

"Absolutely. In fact, why don't we sit outside on the porch? That way you can keep the door between us if you want to."

There was a pause, then a sniffle before she spoke again. "You'd do that? Just to make sure I was comfortable?"

"Gina, honey. Of course. I like bein' around you. I like talkin' to you and just wavin' at you as I drive by. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you always want to spend that kind of time with me." God, could I sound any more pathetic? Did I fucking care?

"Come over, Falcon. I've unlocked the door and am making coffee. Let yourself in. We can sit and chat for a while."

"You don't have to tell me twice, honey."

I chuckled as I took my time walking up her driveway. I knocked loudly before opening the door. Even though she was expecting me, I wanted to make sure she was well aware of where I was in her home.

“Hey.” Her smile was small, but so beautiful it made my heart ache. How anyone could have hurt this woman was beyond me. She carried a tray with two mugs, a pot of black coffee, cream and sugar. That was something else about Gina. She was always prepared with a way to entertain guests. I got the feeling at least some of that came from the need to have something to concentrate on besides being scared all the time. The other was a desire to make people comfortable and welcome. The way she dealt with all the children the club had recently acquired seemed to fulfill that side of her as well. Which gave her an added distraction from her fear. “I have some caramel sauce in the fridge if you’d rather.”

“Black’s fine for me. Thank you, Gina.”

She fixed hers with a liberal amount of cream and sugar before blowing gently over the liquid and taking a careful sip. I watched her as I took a sip of my own coffee, letting the silence stretch. I’d follow her lead.

“Um, I should thank you. I actually had dozed off and was having a nightmare when you called.” One hand cupped her mug while she ran her other hand up and down her arm.

It surprised me she admitted that so easily. I thought it was probably good though. Like she was really trying to give me the benefit of the doubt and take me at my word that I wanted to look out for her.

“In that case, I’m glad I didn’t hang up the second I realized it was Rocket and Lemon’s house I was seeing with a light on.”

Again, she gave me a small smile. This time I thought she looked more relaxed. She was still on guard, but she was at least somewhat comfortable.

“Can I ask you a question?” A light blush dusted her cheeks, and she couldn’t meet my gaze. Her breathing became more rapid and she fiddled with the coffee mug in her hand.

“Of course. Anything.”

She swallowed, obviously nervous but determined to plow on. “Why do you keep taking me for rides on that pink bike?”

I let out a surprised chuckle, not able to help the burst of mirth. Lemon, the bitch, had painted my Harley pink because she said Gina had always wanted a pink bike. So Lemon had made it happen. But she’d told Gina I’d insisted she do it because I wanted to make things right with her. Lemon had told me I could thank her later. I suppose now was later.

“You don’t like it? I mean, I can stop --”

“No!” She interrupted, reaching out to grip my wrist firmly, like she was trying to prevent me from doing anything drastic. I had to grin because I knew there was no way she wanted me to stop taking her on those rides. “I love it! I cried the first day you pulled up on it and told me we were going to take a spin around the compound. I know the guys give you shit about it, but you haven’t had it repainted or traded it off. I just wondered, you know...” She pulled her hand away from my arm and I felt the loss. I liked that she’d kept the contact as long as she had. “Why would you keep riding with me on it when you hate the color?”

This, I had an answer for. I reached out slowly, giving her time to pull back if she didn’t want my touch. She turned her hand over, and I laced my fingers through hers

lightly. “Because you cried the first day I pulled up and told you we were goin’ on a ride.”

She sucked in a breath and her eyes got glassy with tears. I gave her what I was sure was a thunderous look, but honestly, I couldn’t help it. I panicked! “Don’t you dare cry on me.”

Thankfully, she must have seen the humor in the situation because she laughed through her tears. “I never knew such hard men could be so affected by a girl’s tears. I mean, I thought you guys weren’t exactly sympathetic types, but I’m beginning to think otherwise. I’ve noticed that if one of the old ladies so much as has a lower lip start quivering, you go rounding up the wagons and calling in reinforcements to make the tears stop.” She shook her head even as she smiled and used her free hand to wipe at her eyes with a napkin. “It’s not natural.”

I chuckled, relief flooding me I’d managed to stave off those fucking tears. “I agree, honey. It ain’t natural. But our women seemed to have done that to us. And you know what else?” When she smiled and shook her head like she couldn’t wait to hear this, I continued, “We love every fuckin’ second of it, and I could give a good Goddamn if everyone in the club knows how we feel.”

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Gina

When I first came to Grim Road, I thought I'd found a paradise. It hadn't taken long for Hammer to make me realize how wrong I'd been. I thought he loved me or I'd never have come here with him. I still don't know why he wanted me at the compound. There were women here who would let him do whatever he wanted to them. Well, within reason. I'd heard the women discussing some of the guys and knew they all believed they had protection if anyone got too rough.

Now, I knew the girls were right. I'd also found out Hammer was the exception rather than the norm. It took me a long while -- and constant reassurance by Lemon -- to get to a place where I felt comfortable with the guys here. I still wasn't comfortable with everyone. It was hard to look them in the face after Hammer had basically whored me out to them all.

I knew the guys wouldn't hurt me now. When Hammer had me under his control, he had me convinced his brothers in this MC would make me wish I was dead if I ever went against him. Grim Road's compound was hidden in a wildlife reserve. I had no idea how they'd managed that, but I was smart enough to know if this place was a secret, they wouldn't let me leave alive.

Lemon had told me I could go if I wanted and she'd make sure I had a place to live but I was reluctant to leave Grim Road. Yes, I'd been terrorized for a year and a half, but I truly understood the difference between Hammer and the other guys in Grim I'd met. When Hammer took me, I had nothing. No one. I'd been living on the street. At Grim Road, now that they realized I hadn't been here willingly, I had someone looking after me. Several someones. Falcon hadn't been the only one to take me on a

bike ride, but he was the one who was still around. He was the one who always came around to check on me or make me get out of the house into the fresh air.

And I liked the way he smiled at me.

“I know it’s late, but do you want to go on a ride?” He still held my hand and I found I didn’t want him to let go just yet. I had to smile. The guy didn’t act like a badass biker or military guy. He acted like a teenager with a crush. It was one of the things I liked most about him.

“Um, we could just sit here.”

He gave me a puzzled look, then glanced down at our entwined fingers like he was just noticing. I thought he might pull away, but he didn’t. His fingers closed even tighter around my hand and he smiled. “We can sit here as long as you want.”

That was the thing about Falcon. He and Lemon bickered back and forth like competitive siblings, but with me, Falcon was always so patient. He was around me all the time. Not a day went by I didn’t either see him or talk to him. We’d had sex. You know. Before. When Hammer had given his OK for the guys to have me if they wanted me. I’d fucked him the same as I had a lot of his brothers. Since he found out I hadn’t been as willing as he’d thought, Falcon had never once touched me in a sexual way. He’d protected my personal space and always made sure I knew I could depend on him if I needed anything. All of our interactions were as platonic as it got and that gave me the courage to enjoy our time together. Falcon was with me because he wanted to be. Not because he thought I’d fuck him, or for any other self-serving reason. He just liked being with me.

“Want to watch a movie?” He jerked his head at the TV. “I got all kinds of streaming services we can log into.”

I squeezed his hand briefly before tugging away. “You don’t have to stay with me, you know.”

“Yeah. I know.” He grinned before standing and reaching for me to pull me to my feet. “Now. I gave you your chance to pick a movie. It’s my turn. Go make me some popcorn and I’ll pick the movie.”

I couldn’t help the surprised giggle that escaped my mouth. Falcon winked at me before going to the living room to find his movie. Falcon and I ate a lot of popcorn. Popping a batch wasn’t difficult and didn’t take much time. I popped two batches. His with salt. Mine with popcorn butter and kettle corn seasoning. I brought us both sodas.

As always, Falcon sat on one end of the couch, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee and his arm over the back of the seat next to him. He sat first, not to claim a spot on my furniture, but to give me the choice to sit on the opposite end or next to him. Usually, I’d start on the side away from him. By the end of whatever we were watching at the time, I’d be sitting next to him. That was as far as I’d been brave enough to go.

Tonight, I sat next to him. I leaned against him and he let his fingers play along my shoulder. He didn’t pull me against him or try to wrap his arm around me. He just let me know his hand was there.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes and letting his scent fill me. The heat from his body filled me with warmth and I wanted to curl up in his lap and have his arms wrapped tightly around me, just for the sensation. The closeness. I craved that closeness, was starved for it. But other than a few of the women, I didn’t like being touched. I wasn’t a hugger. The only person I had any desire to have wrap their arms around me was Falcon.

We sat in silence, eating popcorn and watching *The Fifth Element* . And yes. It was my favorite movie which Falcon knew.

“Thank you.” My words were barely above a whisper, but I knew Falcon would hear me. He always heard me.

“For what, honey?”

“For sitting up with me. For watching out for me. I know you’re keeping a closer eye on me than I should be comfortable with, but you make me feel safe. I never thought I’d have that in my life. So, yeah, I know you waking me up from my nightmares isn’t a coincidence. I just don’t care. Thank you, Falcon. For all of it.”

Falcon grunted before leaning down to brush a kiss on the top of my head. We sat in silence for a while before he said, “So... You’re saying you don’t mind that I was stalking you. Right?”

I couldn’t help the laughter bubbling up from inside me. I turned my face into his chest, clinging to his shirt as I shook with silent laughter.

“Don’t see nothin’ so funny ‘bout that,” he grumbled, but I noticed how he threaded his fingers through my hair and massaged my scalp lightly. “Just wanted to make sure we were, you know, on the same page.”

“Yes, Falcon. We’re on the same page. I’m not mad that you were stalking me.” I smiled up at him, an invitation I hadn’t really meant to make, but now that I’d offered, I wasn’t backing down.

The relaxed grin on Falcon’s face faded slightly. He held my gaze, looking for something. “If you don’t want me to kiss you, Gina, tell me now.” I swallowed, but my focus fell onto his lips. Mine parted and I sucked in a ragged breath.

“Good.” Slowly, Falcon moved closer to brush his lips with mine. They were warm and firm. Commanding yet not overwhelming or rough. He licked the seam of my lips lightly but didn’t push even when I opened my mouth.

The kiss didn’t last long. Seconds. But when he pulled back to look down at me, I felt like I was high. My head spun and my entire being was focused on where our lips had touched. I whimpered and almost chased him, needing to get his lips back on mine. Falcon’s fingers gently brushing my cheek stopped me.

“Thank you for the kiss, Gina.”

“I liked it.” I ducked my head, embarrassed.

“I didn’t scare you?”

My reflex was to answer with an immediate “no.” But I wanted to be honest with Falcon. While everyone in Grim Road had been good to me, Falcon had gone above and beyond. And I genuinely liked the guy, not to mention that I wasn’t too proud to admit I was sexually attracted to him. I probably shouldn’t be. I was sure a psychiatrist would have a field day with me, but I was attracted to him. Not to anyone else I’d interacted with. Only Falcon.

I stared up at him, my lips still tingling from his kiss. “No.”

He gave me a quizzical look. “You thought about your answer. Are you sure? Last thing I want is for you to ever be scared of me, Gina.”

“That’s why I thought about what you asked. I’m scared of everything. But I’m not scared of you, Falcon. Not at all.”

I thought he might kiss me again -- wanted him to kiss me again -- but I also wasn’t

as honest with myself as I tried to be with him. Even though I wanted his kiss again, I was also still emotionally tapped from the nightmare that woke me up initially. Instead, he kissed my forehead and urged me closer to him before putting his arm back on the couch and letting his fingers rest on my shoulder again.

I took a breath. Then another. The longer I sat there with Falcon, the more I relaxed. I hadn't realized how tense I'd become. Probably because that was my default setting since Hammer had brought me here. Even knowing I was safe, sometimes I just couldn't get over that feeling of wondering if someone was going to walk through the door of my house and want something from me I wasn't willing to give. Should I have left after Hammer died a few months ago? Probably. But I was glad I'd stayed. My story wasn't a pretty happy ever after, but I thought I could be happy. I just needed to get past what had happened and let myself realize that part was over. The people here were good people. I'd just managed to stumble onto a bad apple.

We sat on the couch and neither of us moved. It was like an uneasy truce between us. As long as neither of us moved, everything would be OK. I could pretend Falcon was mine and he could pretend our past had been different. Both fantasies were fiction. It was a depressing thought.

Little by little, I relaxed. I had my head on his shoulder. Occasionally, Falcon would nuzzle my head. We didn't talk. We didn't move. We simply watched the movie. Our popcorn sat on the coffee table along with our drinks, untouched. I had the odd thought that I'd wasted the popcorn I'd made earlier, but it was more something that caught my attention and tugged at me, keeping me from dozing off when I started to drift. Not that it helped.

The next thing I remember was being laid carefully in my bed. Someone pulled up the covers and tucked me in. Then I opened my eyes just as Falcon kissed my forehead while he stroked a few stray curls from my face.

“Sleep well, baby. If anyone deserves a good night’s rest, you do.”

“Falcon?” I gazed up at him, my eyes blurry as I tried to keep them open when they were so heavy.

“I’m here, honey. Ain’t goin’ nowhere.” His voice was husky but gentle and soft. He reached out to turn off the bedside lamp and the room was enveloped in darkness.

“You can stay if you don’t want to go home so late,” I managed. I was so tired my words were slurring.

“I’m stayin’,” he said, still stroking my hair in soothing movements of his hand. “I’ll be here if you need me. You’re not alone, Gina. I’m your protector. Always remember that.”

I blinked up at him, sleep already starting to claim me again. “Do you promise?”

“On my life, baby. Anyone who ever tries to hurt you again, I’ll kill ‘em myself. No matter who it is. Even me.”

His words should have unsettled me. There was so much to unwrap in that simple declaration. Instead, my entire body relaxed, almost like when alcohol starts to hit after you’ve already done a couple more shots than you probably should have. I nodded my head and smiled up at him. “OK.” It was the last thing I remember before sleep took me.

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Falcon

I needed to go home. Needed to get out of this place before I did something stupid. Like crawl in the bed with the broken little doll and hold her until the pieces fused back together. Gina was quite possibly the strongest person I'd ever met. Even stronger than Lemon, who regularly busted my balls.

This woman chose to stay in a place where she'd been terrorized for over a year. I get she'd had a shit life even before she came here, but I was surprised when she didn't head out of the compound like the hounds of hell were after her once she knew she was free to leave.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. I pulled it out and checked the message and nearly growled when I saw Dom's name. I'd known this was coming, but I hadn't anticipated that I'd be in Gina's house with her most of the night. The need to tell him to fuck the hell off was making my jaw clench. Yeah. Not the best idea, especially since I hadn't been a patched member of Grim Road long enough to go against the sergeant at arms. Which... yeah. I wasn't a pussy by any means, but going against Dom without a better reason than, "I'm watching my woman sleep. Piss off," would be stupid.

Dom: Need you at the clubhouse .

Me: Sunrise .

Dom: Now .

Fuck. I stood and pulled the quilt higher on her shoulder before leaving the room. I locked her door when I left the house. Leaving was so hard it was a physical ache in my chest. It felt wrong because I knew anything I'd managed to forge over the last several months could easily be undone if I disappeared on her now.

I hurried to my bike, which I'd parked in Rocket's driveway when I'd gone to stand vigil. Rocket and Lemon both knew I did this, but neither had said a word about it to anyone, including me. I figured, by parking there on the regular, if Rocket or Lemon wanted to warn me off Gina, they would.

The ride to the main clubhouse took less than five minutes. I lined up with the other bikes in the lot before striding inside. The club members present sat at the various tables in groups, talking among themselves. A few nursed their beer, but most were quietly waiting for the meeting to start.

"Nice of you to join us, Falcon." Dom crossed his arms over his chest while Ringo, the enforcer for Grim Road, gave me a knowing smirk. Yeah. They all knew what I was doing. Some approved, but there were a couple who were pretty pissed about it because they thought she needed to get away from all of us. Even if she didn't want to.

"Bite me," I shot back automatically. It got a few chuckles. Except for Dom.

The bigger man pointed his finger at me and raised an eyebrow. "I will beat your ass, you little punk." Which got even more chuckles.

"All right, all right." Rocket stood and got to business. "We got a heads-up from a paramilitary company called ExFil. Most of you know the place and the guy who owns it. His name's Joe Gill. Used to be president of a club in Somerset, Kentucky called Bones MC."

“Most of the guys at Salvation’s Bane MC work for ‘em too, right?” Jackhammer was a newer guy. He hadn’t started out as a prospect, like most of us. He’d been brought in as a favor to Boon. Boon had been in Grim Road the longest of anyone in the club. He was blunt and to the point and didn’t care who the fuck he offended. All traits Jackhammer tried to imitate. Only problem was, Jackhammer wasn’t Boon.

“They are.” Rocket glared at Jackhammer, no doubt knowing the other man was about to protest.

“Then what the fuck do they need us for?” Jackhammer snorted a laugh, like he’d gotten one over on... someone? Salvation’s Bane maybe? The man was as mean as he was stupid. I honestly had no idea what his thought processes were and had no desire to find out. I also think Boon was suckin’ some serious dick to get this dumb shit into Grim Road. We had all been black ops at one point in our service. Most of us had either outlived our usefulness or were on a government kill list somewhere. Not Jackhammer. He’d been good for a while, but once he decided to show his ass, he tended to go big.

Rocket’s jaw clenched. Yeah. I wasn’t the only one who hated the little bastard. “Did I say they asked for help?”

“That’s where you were goin’.” Jackhammer stood, moving a couple steps in Rocket’s direction. “Tell me I’m wrong.” He stuck his chin out, directly challenging Rocket.

“Fucker has a death wish,” I muttered, shaking my head. I covered my mouth with my hand in case I burst out laughing when Lemon castrated the bastard in a few seconds. Last thing I wanted was for Lemon to think I was on her side in anything.

“Yep.” Rattler had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. We’d grown up together, gone to the Marines together, then joined covert ops together. Which is

how we'd ended up here together.

"Ten bucks on Lemon," I said softly.

"You've lost your Goddamn mind if you think I'm lettin' you tell Lemon I bet against her," Rattler grumbled.

Around us, similar conversations hummed softly. Dom scowled at us. Then pulled a folded bill from his pocket and said something to Ringo and shoved the money at him. Ringo held up his hands and backed away, shaking his head. Obviously, Ringo was smarter than he looked.

As if on cue, Lemon sauntered from where she'd been fiddling with the big dartboard on the wall behind Rocket. Before I realized what she was gonna do, Lemon marched straight up to Jackhammer. When she got close, she put one dart in her teeth sideways, like a pencil, then stabbed the other two into Jackhammer's thighs. The third she saved for his crotch.

A collective "OHHHH!" went up around the room before everyone laughed. Everyone except Rocket. No one offered to help Jackhammer.

Rocket let the ruckus continue for a couple of minutes before quieting everyone with a look. "What I said, you dumbshit, is they gave us a heads-up."

Jackhammer was on his knees on the floor of the clubhouse. He looked around the room until he caught Boon's gaze. "Ain't you gonna help me?"

Boon gave him a disgusted look. "Shoulda helped you permanently the last time you asked me that fuckin' question. Instead, I brought you here. To my home." Boon leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the table in front of him. "Apparently you still ain't grasped the concept of actions and consequences."

Blood was beginning to pool beneath and around Jackhammer. Usually this was the point where Rocket scolded Lemon, and Lemon pouted and pretended to be all innocent and shit before she launched that last dart straight into Jackhammer's eye. Instead, the little hellion just stood there, twirling the point of the dart against her index finger lazily.

"You gonna get up and join the meetin' or sit there and bleed?" Rocket gave Jackhammer a look that had been known to leave prospects quaking in their boots.

With his defenses down -- because of a dart to the dick -- Jackhammer had no hope of holding his ground. He grunted and tried to rise to his feet but the darts in his thighs must have protested, because the man gave a sharp yelp.

"Jesus Christ," Boon muttered, scrubbing his hand over his eyes. "Will someone just shoot him and put him outta his misery?"

"Kinda feels a little like shootin' a helpless, if stupid, teenager." Ringo took out his sidearm and chambered a round. "But I can sure the fuck do it."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Finally! Lemon pushed her way past Rocket and knelt in front of Jackhammer. Before he knew what Lemon was doing, she reached out and yanked both darts from Jackhammer's legs. Which caused another yelp. That yelp turned into a full-on girl scream when she yanked the dart from his crotch. "There. All better! Go see Bullet for a tetanus shot later."

"You fuckin' bitch!" Jackhammer screamed. "I'll fuckin' kill you for this! Fuckin' whore!"

I stood so fast, my chair tumbled back. I wasn't the only one. None of us were as fast as Rocket, though. He pulled his gun and shot Jackhammer in the crotch. Not once. Three. Fucking. Times.

“You want somethin’ to scream about, you pissant little motherfucker?” Rocket shot him in the crotch a fourth time. “Try that.” Again, Rocket shot. “How about that, too?” Blood was now everywhere. Jackhammer was covered in it and there was no doubt Rocket had hit one or both femoral arteries. Probably every blood vessel in Jackhammer’s pelvis. In any event, Jackhammer was no longer screaming. It wasn’t like Rocket to lose his cool, and definitely not like him to kill indiscriminately. Which told me Jackhammer had been way more trouble than Rocket was willing to take.

‘Course, it coulda just been the fact the fool had threatened to kill Lemon, no matter how much pain the fucker was in at her doing. The easiest way to unleash the outlaw in Rocket was to threaten his woman. Lemon had had a couple close calls since she met Rocket and the president hadn’t gotten over any of it yet. None of us had.

“Thank Christ.” Boon holstered his own gun before sitting back down. “I’d hate to’ve had to explain to Bessy how I’d killed her fuckin’ kid when I finally got to hell.”

“Jackhammer was your stepson?” I asked before I could stop myself and immediately winced. “Never mind. Ain’t my business.”

Boon gave me an impatient look. “Hell no, the bastard ain’t my stepson. He was my old lady’s kid. I never claimed him in any way, shape, or form.” He spat where Jackhammer lay in a heap on the floor nearby. “Told you this was your last chance to straighten up, kid. Shoulda fuckin’ listened.”

“Can we get on with this or would someone else like to die?” The look on Rocket’s face said he’d had enough.

Scrub, the cleaner for Grim Road, stood and nudged Jackhammer’s lifeless form with the toe of his boot. When the other man didn’t move, Scrub shrugged. “I’ll take him out back to dispose of. Let me know when the meeting’s over, and I’ll see what I

need to do here.”

Rocket just grunted before continuing. “Ain’t no easy way to say this. Rattler. Falcon. One member of your team survived your last mission. She’s alive, but a prisoner.”

I felt like I’d been sucker punched. I think I actually grunted. “No,” I whispered. “Not possible.” I turned to look at Rattler who had an equally sick look on his face. Not that we valued female lives over male lives, but I hadn’t missed the fact Rocket had said “she” and there was no way Rattler missed it either. “We visually accounted for every single man and woman in our mission. We didn’t leave anyone behind, least of all a woman. Christ, Rocket!”

“I have no doubt your count was correct.” Rocket dug out a thumb drive from his pocket and tossed it to me. I caught it reflexively or it would have bounced off my chest and hit the floor. I was still trying to wrap my head around what he’d said.

“We brought every one of our team back with us. They were dead, but we brought them home. We carried their bodies to the landing zone and loaded them into the aircraft ourselves.” I could barely form words. Reliving the worst day in my life... Thinking about the events of that day made me nauseous. It wasn’t just a matter of getting our brothers and sisters to the LZ and in the chopper. We’d had to pick up as many pieces of them as we could. In some cases, it had probably been left up to investigators to figure out what body went with that limb. Or head.

“You did. What you didn’t know was there was someone on the inside of that terror cell already, giving your handler real time data. No one bothered to tell you because...” Rocket trailed off, clenching his jaw. He actually glanced over to Lemon who was focused squarely on our president. Her husband. She was as stony-faced as Rocket and, in some ways, infinitely more terrifying, even if she was still practically a fucking teenager. She nodded her head slightly and Rocket continued. “Because the operative imbedded in that shit hole was Joilyn Graves.”

Instantly, Rattler got to his feet. He pulled his gun and aimed it at Rocket's head. I'll admit, I had to stop myself from doing the same. It wasn't every day someone told you a woman you thought had been dead for years had been the deep operative on your mission. And you'd left her there. Also, it probably didn't help the fact that Joilyn Graves happened to be Rattler's sister.

To the president's credit, he didn't flinch. In fact, Rocket looked like he'd been expecting exactly this reaction.

"Easy, Rattler," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder, trying to urge him to lower his weapon before he got himself -- and me -- killed. "We'll figure this out."

"You don't get to utter her name, Rocket. Not like this." I'd never seen this side of Rattler. The battle-hardened man's hand actually shook as he held his gun. "Joi died a year before everything that happened that night. You go back to ExFil or Cain or whoever the fuck told you this fuckin' horse shit and tell 'em I'm comin' to kill them."

"It's all on the flash drive, Rattler. Information that will explain everything. Obviously, the CIA didn't offer any of this. Data and his wife, Zora, along with Cain's daughter, Suzie, found this. I'm certain their means of procurement were less than legal."

Yeah. The full impact of this would hit me later, but I had bigger things to worry about right now. "You said they were givin' us a heads-up," I said after clearing my throat. Rocket had hit me with way too fucking much in way too fucking short a time for me to process. "They offerin' to let us in on this?"

Rocket nodded. "They are. Cain said he thought the two of you needed the option to go with them or not. Piston said to consider it the first official act of the South Eastern MC Alliance."

“That op went to shit two fuckin’ years ago,” Rattler bit out. He’d holstered his weapon, but he was still standing and looking like he wanted to be anywhere but in this fucking meeting. “What happened for ExFil to get this now?”

“Not sure,” Rocket admitted. “But I think Mama and Pops might have had something to do with it. Them, or someone they know.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just something Cain said. He mentioned Pops in the same breath he told me they were being sent after your sister. That man doesn’t give out information without a reason.”

“When do we leave?” Rattler clenched and unclenched his fists. I knew how he felt. It had taken me a long while to make my peace with Joilyn’s death. She’d died in a fiery car crash on a rural road. By the time emergency services got there, she’d been almost completely burned. The autopsy had identified her by dental records and me and Rattler had mourned her death.

Joilyn had been Rattler’s last living relative. He, Joilyn, and I had become a small family of our own. I was included with them because their parents had fostered me. I’d been orphaned when I was only eight, and Rattler and I had been best friends from the first evening I arrived at his home. Joilyn had been born three months after I arrived so I’d known her her entire life. It had devastated me and Rattler both when she’d been killed.

Now, to know she was inside that hellhole, providing us intel at risk to her life and, not only had we not known, but we’d cut and run, it felt like the absolute worst betrayal. We’d left her to her fate. Once again, I’d failed someone who depended on me. Seemed all I did was fail people. At least, it felt like I had from that night on. Even now, I was actually planning on letting down one of the most important people

in my life. Leaving on this mission and leaving Gina here was going to be hard on her. But I couldn't leave Rattler to do this on his own. For more than one reason.

"You leave here in two days. Cain said he was sending a team to pick you up."

"Sounds like you expected we'd not only accept their invitation, but that we'd insist on going." I gripped Rattler's shoulder as I spoke. It looked like a show of support, but if I touched him, I could tell how tense he was. Pulling the gun on Rocket had been bad. I thought Rattler had himself back under control, but the last thing I wanted was for him to accidentally hurt someone because he wasn't thinking clearly. The PTSD resulting from that night wasn't subtle. Rattler's muscles were tight, but the trembling seemed to have stopped.

"I'm not a dumbass, Falcon." Rocket gave me an annoyed look.

"Wait." Dom looked from me and Rattler to Rocket and back. "Why would Cain make that kind of an offer? Seems risky puttin' an unknown element with a team right before going on a mission."

"It is." Rocket's gaze never left mine. "Which is why I want to know why he included you, Falcon. Rattler I get. Joilyn is his sister."

"Yeah." I scrubbed a hand over my face. I inhaled a shaky breath. "Joilyn was going to be my wife."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Gina

I woke when the bed dipped and someone brushed hair off my forehead. Gentle fingers traced my cheek and chin almost reverently.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

I opened my eyes and smiled up at Falcon. “Hey, yourself.”

“How you feelin’?”

“Little strung out. You know. Like I didn’t get much sleep.” He smiled tenderly at me, but there was something in his expression I couldn’t figure out. “Is everything all right?”

Falcon glanced away before shaking his head slightly. “I have to leave in a couple days, Gina. I hope I won’t be gone long.”

Everything inside me rebelled. I shook my head before I could stop myself. Then I closed my eyes and swallowed, trying to rid myself of the lump forming in my throat.

I sat up, pushing myself back against the headboard and tucked my knees to my chest. “Of course. Just be careful.”

Falcon hesitated a moment before reaching out to carefully take my hand and I let him. “It’s early. How about I fix us some breakfast and we can talk.”

Something about the way he spoke set off alarm bells inside my head. “What’s wrong?”

He gave me a small smile. “We can talk after we eat, baby. Everything will be fine.”

“The only time people say that is when everything isn’t fine.” I should have known this thing with Falcon was too good to be true. I’d deluded myself into thinking we could have some kind of relationship where I wasn’t a whore or someone to share with his brothers whenever he wanted a thrill.

Lord knew I’d overheard several of the club girls comment how they knew none of the patched members would ever take an old lady from the pool of club whores. Made sense, I guess. I doubted it would be comfortable if you had a woman every other man in the place had been with. Which is why I should have known better than to get my hopes up that Falcon saw me as something different.

“That’s why we need to talk. So you know the whole story. Or at least as much as I know.” He very slowly brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my fingers tenderly. “Don’t give up on me, Gina. Please.” His voice was tender and full of emotion. That was the only reason I was able to nod.

I was still dressed in the leggings and oversized T-shirt I’d had on the night before. “I probably smell gross. I should change clothes.”

“You smell incredible, baby. Nothin’ trumps the smell of warm woman after she’s woken from a contented sleep.” He smiled warmly at me. “But you do what makes you comfortable.” He stood but kept my hand which meant I either had to tug away from him or get out of bed. I didn’t have the strength for the latter so I followed where he led.

“I make a mean omelet.” Falcon grinned at me. “Any requests?”

I gave him a small smile. “You know what I like.”

“Yeah.” He gave me an arrogant lift of his chin. “I do.”

A few minutes later, we each had a plate full of fluffy omelet covered in cheese. Just the way I liked it. Basically, egg and cheese. What’s not to like? It also meant this conversation was going to be as bad as I’d feared because Falcon didn’t try to get me to have anything other than the eggs. He usually put all kinds of other shit in it. Veggies or meats. Today, though. Just an incredibly fluffy egg and cheese.

We ate in silence. Well, we pushed food around on the plate. I’m not sure either of us actually ate anything.

Finally, Falcon moved his plate away. I did the same. It was a lost cause anyway.

“Just say it,” I whispered, not looking at Falcon. I knew in my heart whatever he was going to say would change our relationship. He was probably tired of having to tiptoe around me. The mere fact he’d been watching me this whole time and hadn’t approached me before now told me he was probably trying to decide if he wanted to get to know me better. Or if he could approach me for sex again. Maybe that was it.

“If you want sex, all you have to do is ask. I know you’d never hurt me.” I spoke softly, unable to look at Falcon. I couldn’t look at him told me I wasn’t ready for intimacy with him. Or maybe I was ashamed because Falcon thought he couldn’t treat me like a normal woman.

“Baby.” He took my hand and moved to kneel in front of me. As I looked down at him, I tried my best to fight back tears. He didn’t need another round of tears or weakness on my part.

“Whatever it is you have to tell me, Falcon, just say it. I can take it.”

“Let’s clear some things up first, OK?” There was an intense light in his eyes. Whatever he was about to say, he felt passionately about. “If we ever have sex, Gina, it will be when you’re ready. You ever don’t feel comfortable with what we’re doing or where we’re headed, you tell me.” He reached up to frame my face with his hands. “I never want you to feel like you have to do something you don’t want to, Gina.”

“But... if it’s not that, are you leaving because of me?”

“No, honey.” He took a breath. “My past is murky. Before I came to Grim Road, I let a lot of people down and they died. Before that, it was me and Rattler and his sister, Joilyn.” He winced as he said the other woman’s name. “Joilyn... I don’t know what happened to her, but up until this meeting, I thought she’d died in a car wreck. So did Rattler.”

“You thought she died? Does that mean she’s not dead?”

“It looks that way. It was why we were called to the meeting. A paramilitary group has been hired to rescue a CIA deep cover operative. When this group found out who they were going after, they did some research to prepare for the job. That’s when they found out who she was in relation to Grim Road. Which is Rattler’s sister.”

When he didn’t say anything more, but looked like he wanted to, dread built inside my chest until it felt like a lead weight. “What else?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

“Yeah. What else.” Falcon looked like he was in so much pain. When he spoke, it was a hoarse rasp, like he was choking on the emotion clearly visible in his expression. And I knew.

“Joilyn. You love her.”

“I used to. I’m not ever going to lie to you, Gina. No matter how much it hurts me.” He shook his head. “I was supposed to marry her. She died. That was more than two years ago. I might not have known she was alive, but she knew how to contact me, and she never did. So it doesn’t matter if I still love her or not.”

“Yes, it does, Falcon. Your feelings matter.” I ducked my head and he let me, resting his hands on my knees as he stayed on his knees. “I understand this must be a shock to you.”

“Yeah. It is. I’m still processing, but Joilyn isn’t the important thing right now.”

“You said these people were supposed to rescue her. You’re going with them. That’s why you have to leave. Isn’t it?”

“It is. They’ve given me and Rattler the opportunity to go with them. Even if I’m not with Joilyn anymore, I can’t leave her safety in the hands of someone else. Not even men I know are competent. She’s Rattler’s sister. The three of us grew up together and relied on each other until we were adults. Even then, we had each other’s backs. No matter what. Rattler and I went into the Marines right after high school, and we sent money home to Joilyn so she could go to college. She was the smart one. Me and Rattler were grunts.”

“Sounds like you admired her a lot.”

“I did.”

“What do you think happened? I mean, with the car accident and where she’s been all this time.”

“That’s something I want to find out, but it’s not the reason I have to go with the team assigned to rescue her.”

“I don’t understand.” I was so fucking close to tears, I knew there would be no way to get much farther before I broke down. Christ, this was going to hurt. Because I could already tell there was no way I could measure up to this woman.

“Me and Rattler hadn’t been here long. We were still prospects when Rocket and Lemon first got together. Before that, we’d just come off a mission where my whole fuckin’ team was killed. Eight men and women. Rattler and me were the only two who made it. Today we learned there was a third person on that mission.”

“Joilyn?” My heart pounded. It was one more way this woman was better than me. If she’d been on the same mission Falcon had been on, did that mean she was a soldier too? Had she sacrificed her safety and freedom in the name of service? Even knowing I was likely to lose Falcon to this woman, I couldn’t hate her.

“Yeah, baby. She was the agency’s asset on the inside of that terror cell. No one told me and Rattler or we’d have burned down the fuckin’ earth to bring her home. And she’s been there ever since. Two fuckin’ years. The one thing I always promised anyone under my command was something I heard in a movie once. As a warrior, it made sense to me. Dead or alive, we all come home together. I’ve never left anyone. The fact it was Joilyn makes it so much worse.”

“Because she was your fiancée.”

“Because she was someone I considered family.”

“I understand. You need to bring her home.”

“I do, baby.”

I gave him a tremulous smile as tears overflowed and spilled down my cheeks. Falcon stood and pulled me to my feet. Instead of stepping back, though, he lifted me

into his arms and picked me up. He carried me to the couch, then sat, positioning me so I straddled him and rested his hands on my hips. His expression seemed more relaxed. He wasn't at ease by any means, but I thought maybe what he'd told me about him and Rattler and Joilyn had been something he needed off his chest.

More, I now knew he blamed himself for the death of his team. He hadn't come out and said it that way, but for whatever reason, he felt like he'd failed them in some very important way. "I promise you, Gina, I will come back. I'll get Joilyn back to safety, then I'm coming home." He met my gaze and held it steadily. "To you. Then we'll have a long talk about what we both want."

"Just promise you'll let me know you're safe. When you get back. You don't have to see me again if you don't want to." It hurt. God, it hurt! Falcon was a protector first and foremost. Sure, he tried to hide it under a macho exterior, but I could see that side of him in the way he'd taken care of me these last few months. There was no way he could turn his back on a woman he loved. And that woman wasn't me. It was the woman he was supposed to marry.

"Listen to me, Gina. Really listen." When I gave him a shaky nod, he continued. "I'm. Comin'. Back. For. You ." He said each word slowly and distinctly. "I can't trust anyone but Rattler to get Joilyn out of whatever hellhole she's in. But once she's safe, I'm comin' home. To you . Do you understand me?"

"I -- I don't -- I don't know." I sobbed out the response, the dam holding back my emotions beginning to fail.

"I know I haven't exactly earned your trust yet, but I'm asking for it. Just this once. Give me the chance to prove myself to you."

I slowly lowered my forehead to his and sighed. The tears came faster -- it was becoming impossible to hold them back. I wanted this with everything in my being. I

wanted Falcon. But I was desperately afraid my reality didn't account for a man like Falcon. He deserved a whole woman. I was fragmented into so many pieces, there was no way to put me back together without some lingering cracks.

"God, Falcon." I took in another shuddering breath. "Please, I'm begging you, don't break my heart any more than it's already breaking."

He wrapped his arms around me then, squeezing me to him tightly. "Never, baby. I'm not ever gonna try to sell you somethin' I don't fully mean. I will come back. I will come to you. I'll make sure you are given updates as often as possible and I will call you the first chance I'm able when we're out safely."

"You promise this isn't a line of bullshit? Because I'm not sure I could handle it if you're not sincere."

"I'm completely sincere." He rubbed my back up and down in a soothing caress. "Like I said. I will never lie to you. I'm done denying I want you for my own, Gina. Because, the more I get to know you, the more I love just being with you. So, I'm gonna do what I have to because, no matter what led her to this point in her life, Joilyn is still my best friend's sister. She made her choice. Now, I've made mine."

Falcon turned my face up to his and took my lips in a tender, soul-destroying kiss. His lips were a silky glide over mine, his tongue lapping softly. He coaxed me to open for him and, when I did, he slid inside my mouth briefly. He teased me, but I didn't feel overwhelmed or pressured. It felt like a promise. A promise of what he could do to me if I let him. Of how good he could make sex between us. I already knew the latter. I knew part of the former, but I had the feeling we'd only scratched the surface of what he could make my body give him. I might not have been willing in the strictest sense of the word, but I couldn't deny Falcon had pleased me as much as I had him. Nothing he'd done to me had felt like an assault then, and I didn't think about our encounters as anything other than pleasurable now. If my feelings

weren't normal, I guess I just wasn't normal.

Falcon pulled back to look into my eyes. I felt like I was drowning. In him.
“Falcon...”

“I’m right here, baby. Not goin’ anywhere right now. I’m stayin’ with you as long as I can before we pull out.”

“I need...” I swallowed. “I need to tell you something.”

His eyes narrowed. “You can tell me anything.”

“You never... hurt me. Not once. I was ashamed to admit it at the time, but I liked what we did together.”

Instantly, Falcon stiffened. I knew this was a bad idea, but I needed him to know this.
“I’m so fuckin’ sorry, Gina. If I’d thought for one second that fuckin’ bastard Hammer was lyin’ to us when he said you were OK with him sharin’ you, I’d never have... I’d never...”

“I know. You’re a good man, Falcon. I see it every single day.”

“I’d have gotten you away from Hammer, Gina.” There was so much emotion in his voice. He swallowed several times as if he were choking on all those feelings bottled up inside him. “I’d have protected you.”

I smiled at him. “I believe that more than anything. You’re a protector. I don’t blame you for what happened. I couldn’t when I got as much enjoyment as I did. Not only that, but you were always kind.” I smiled, ducking my head again as I picked at the collar of his T-shirt. “I thought of you as the gentleman biker. You looked so rough around the edges and all dangerous with your tattoos and scars, but you were

unfailingly kind to me. And you always, always asked me if I was still good with the situation. You didn't press, but you asked. To me, that meant more than anything. The way I see it, it was my fault for lying to you."

"No. None of that was your fault. None of it."

"No. I know it wasn't. But it wasn't yours either."

He smiled. "You're a remarkable woman, Gina. I'll be proud to have you on the back of my bike."

For some reason, I felt a smile tug at my lips. Maybe I was deluding myself. Maybe he'd change his mind when he got Joilyn back -- and I knew he'd get her back. Falcon didn't have "quit" in him when it came to something like this. So, maybe he would decide to go back to her. Until he did, though, I was going to pretend he meant what he'd just said. I'd worry about the aftermath later. For now, I was going to enjoy being with the only man I'd ever be able to love in any kind of meaningful way. I was going to take whatever he chose to give me and live in the moment. Tomorrow would work itself out. I'd deal with whatever happened when it happened because I refused to waste energy on borrowed trouble. Life was too fucking short.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Falcon

I felt like the next two days were leading up to my execution. I knew whatever happened in the following days would change my life forever but I wasn't sure which way it was going to go. So I refused to think about it. Instead, I spent every waking moment either pestering Scout, the ExFil team leader who'd contacted me and Rattler, or with Gina.

Right now, Gina and I were in her backyard. We lay on fucking pool lounge chairs. The sun filtered through the trees providing the perfect amount of light and warmth. I'd grilled hotdogs because I couldn't cook anything but omelets for shit, and opened a can of pork and beans for lunch. It was the first time we'd done anything like this, and I was already mentally kicking my own ass for not coaxing her out sooner.

Gina had a genuine smile on her face as she ate nearly burnt hotdogs and sopped up the bean juice with her hotdog bun. She chatted lightly about any topic I distracted her with. I did not mention my imminent departure. Or Joilyn.

"If I'd known you were this great at grilling hotdogs, I'd have invited you over for this sooner." She gave me a bright smile. It struck me that this was the happiest I'd seen her since I'd met her. Even before we all found out the hell Hammer had put her through, her act had fooled us all. Including me. I also hadn't realized how different her fake smiles were from her genuine ones.

Daylight and dark.

I snorted into my beer bottle. "They're burnt, baby."

She gave me a big smile. “Exactly! Soooo good!” She took a bite and actually rolled her eyes in what looked like ecstasy. Which... yeah. All my brain cells went straight to my cock and I absolutely would not acknowledge my fucking hardon.

We finished, and I disposed of the paper plates. When I came back, she’d scooted her chair closer to mine so we were close enough to touch. After I sat down, she tentatively reached over and took my hand in hers. Her palms were slightly sweaty and her hands trembled. I could see the pulse pounding in her neck.

She didn’t look at me, but kept her gaze ahead as if she were studying something beyond the yard. I smiled softly at her, even though she wasn’t looking. I turned my hand so our fingers laced together, and Gina instantly relaxed and she let out a breath she’d been holding. Gina clung to me, her grip tightening almost reflexively.

“It’s going to be all right, Gina.” I spoke softly, not wanting to upset her.

“Sure,” she agreed with a smile. But it was one of her fake smiles. I knew them well because it was those smiles she’d used to greet me with.

With a heavy sigh, I tugged her until I could urge her to crawl onto my lounge chair and into my lap. I wrapped my arms around her and cuddled her close. It took her a few seconds, but she finally relaxed and snuggled against me.

Under the canopy of leaves, with the soft rustle of the wind as our only music, we sat in silence. It was a comfortable quiet, a shared respite. I knew Gina needed this moment of peace as much as I did, maybe even more. She’d been through so much, her resilience constantly tested by the storms of her past.

The sun began its descent, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink. It was beautiful, almost painfully so, reflecting how fleeting moments like this could be. I tightened my hold on Gina slightly, not enough to constrict but enough for her to feel

my strength surrounding her. At least, I hoped that's how she felt. Because I'd do anything to protect her. I hated to leave her, but I couldn't turn my back on Rattler or Joilyn.

"When do you leave?" Her voice was soft. I loved the feel of her lips against my skin where she burrowed against my shoulder. If I had my way, we'd stay like this forever.

"First light." I knew I needed to reassure her. I just wasn't sure what to say.

She exhaled slowly, her breath stirring the fine hairs on my neck. It was a warm, intimate moment -- the kind that branded itself on your heart and soul, impossible to forget or ignore.

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice muffled against my throat. "For this... for today."

I kissed the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her shampoo, a mix of vanilla and something floral. "You're welcome," I whispered back. "Anything for you, baby. Anything." I meant every word. She brought out a fierce protectiveness in me that I'd tried so hard to bury deep. For my own sanity. But it was really impossible. I felt the same need to find Joilyn and get her to safety. But it was somehow different. Probably the time that had passed, combined with my sense of betrayal that Joilyn had been alive all along and hadn't bothered to contact me or Rattler to let us know what was going on.

I could feel the tension slowly ebb from her body. I stroked her hair gently, feeling the soft strands slip between my fingers. The sun dipped lower, stretching our shadows across the lawn like long, dark ribbons until darkness enveloped us in a warm breeze. The tops of the trees were silhouetted against the remaining light in the sky.

“You probably need to get some sleep,” she murmured.

“I’m perfectly fine right where we are.” I wanted to puff out my chest when she nuzzled my shoulder and neck with a contented sigh.

“Me too.”

At some point we dozed off. I woke knowing we weren’t alone. A moment later, Lemon sat in the chair Gina had vacated for my lap.

“Did you tell her?” Lemon spoke softly, obviously not wanting to wake Gina.

“Yeah. I told her everything I know to this point, including about my relationship with Joilyn.”

“Good. I don’t have to tell you to make sure you know what you’re doing before you leave here. Right?”

“Lemon, now ain’t the time.”

She gave me a hard look and I had the immediate urge to give in to whatever demands she made. Somehow, though, I managed to quash the impulse. “She deserves to know what to expect when you come back, Falcon. She’s a good person. None of this should have ever happened to her.”

“You think I don’t know that?” The question came out harsher than I intended, and Gina whimpered in her sleep, shifting slightly and clinging tighter to my shirt with one small fist. “She’s the sweetest person in the world. She loves the kids in the compound and is always making them cookies or some other sickly-sweet treat they absolutely love. I’ve wanted nothing other than to make her my old lady since the day I fuckin’ met her, but I couldn’t.” My chest tightened with emotion as I remembered

those days. “Then Crush warned us to back off but wouldn’t say why.”

“Everyone said they stopped coming to her after Crush and Byte spread the word. Did you?” She raised one blonde eyebrow. “I mean, really?”

“Yeah, Lemon. At least I never went to her for sex again. But I did make a point to talk to her when I could. To be nice to her. Hell, that fuckin’ pink-ass bike I drive now will probably be permanent because I think that’s when she decided maybe I was all right.”

“No accounting for taste.” Lemon was nothing if not blunt and we had a standing feud in which, I’m not too ashamed to admit, she routinely kicked my ass. “But I suppose she could have done worse. Any guy who gives up his man card to ride a pink bike so he can bring some joy to a traumatized woman is OK in my book.”

I blinked, my eyes widening. This wasn’t like the vice president at all. She was the woman who still called me Pigeon Nuts because of our first encounter. Rocket had been in trouble and I’d refused to put the club at risk. It was standard operating procedures at the time. She’d been furious with me. “Christ, Lemon. Are you... are you fuckin’ dyin’ or somethin’? Because if you are, you don’t have to say anything positive about me. I give you permission to call me Pigeon Nuts.” I winced even as I said it.

Lemon let out a bark of laughter, and Gina started awake. “Wassat?”

“Hush, honey.” I stroked her hair. “Everythin’s fine. Lemon dropped by.”

Gina sat up and tried to stand, but I stayed her with my hands firmly on her hips. She gave me a nervous look before giving Lemon one of her fake smiles. “Hi, Lemon. I’m glad you stopped by.” I could tell she was anything but glad, but decided not to say anything. Mostly because I thought I knew why she was wary.

Lemon snorted but grinned at Gina, chuckling lightly. “No, you’re not. Which is exactly why I turned up.” She sat on the edge of the lounge chair sideways, her elbows resting on her knees. Lemon reached over and took one of Gina’s hands in both of hers. “This is your home, Gina. No matter what. We’re your family.”

“I know.” Gina smiled, but again, it was her fake smile.

Lemon studied the other woman for several seconds before shaking her head. “I don’t think you do. Grim Road has a few other chapters over the country. If things are uncomfortable, the guys can transfer. Rocket says members patch over for different reasons. They’d all still have the club’s protection, but you’d be comfortable in your home.”

Gina frowned and shook her head. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Honey, what’s fair is none of this ever happening to you. I’m glad you landed here. I just wish things had gone down differently.”

“I’m glad I’m here too, Lemon. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

Lemon shrugged. “We’re sisters. That’s what sisters do.” Then she gave Gina a wide smile. “Me and the girls are gonna stay with you while the guys are playing in their flying tin cans. We can have a big party with every kind of pizza we can get our hands on. Chips. Beer. Wine. Crown Royal. It’ll be awesome!”

Gina let out a small giggle and I saw her genuine smile break through for a moment. Yeah. She liked the idea but was anxious. “Why not just skip the food altogether?”

“See? This is what I’m talkin’ about! Woman after my own heart.” Lemon raised a hand for a high five and Gina complied with a grin and she started to relax again.

“We should probably get some rest, Lemon.” I couldn’t fuck Gina before I left, but there was no way in hell I was gonna spend my last night before this mission anywhere other than wrapped around her as she slept.

“Yeah. I’ll come with Rocket when he and Knox pick up Falcon and Rattler. You can go back to bed if you want and I’ll be here if you need me.”

“Lemon, why have you always been so nice to me? Is it because you feel sorry for me?”

Lemon held Gina’s gaze for several moments before she answered her. “Gina, you are one of the strongest women I know. You walked through fire and made it out the other side alive. Singed, but alive. Not only that, you’re taking your life back. You’re learning to trust again. It takes a brave person to take the leap. So you’ll always have my respect.”

This was one of many reasons Lemon was vice president of Grim Road. She always seemed to know the exact right -- or wrong -- thing to say or do. It was her superpower. She squeezed Gina’s hands before standing to leave.

Gina didn’t move other than to bunch her hand back into my shirt. “I don’t want you to go.” Her soft whisper wrapped around my heart and squeezed. “It’s selfish, I know. And I don’t expect you to really not go, but I still don’t want you to.”

“Honey, if it was anyone other than Joilyn, I’d gladly tell everyone to piss off. But I can’t.”

“I know. It’s who you are.”

“Come on. How about we go inside and watch a movie before bed?”

She settled back against me, clutching my shirt once more. “Maybe we could stay here a little while longer?”

I kissed the top of her head again. “Of course, baby. As long as you like.”

* * *

Gina

If it gave me a little bit of a reprieve having to think about him leaving me to go rescue the woman who he’d planned on marrying, then I’d take it. I believed Falcon when he said he’d come back, but I wasn’t all certain he’d want to stay with someone like me when he had a second chance at a happy ever after.

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Falcon

Once Gina was asleep, I carefully stood and carried her to bed. She never let go of my shirt. Even in her sleep. She was breaking my fucking heart!

I lay with her cuddled against my chest for most of the remaining hours before I had to leave. It was about an hour before I needed to get up when Gina stirred against me.

“What time is it?” Her words were slurred slightly from sleep.

“Three-thirty.”

“What time do you have to leave?”

“Five.”

She raised herself slightly so she looked down at me. Moonlight spilled through the bedroom window to bathe her face in a silvery glow. She looked ethereal, almost unreal. She lay her palm against my beard-roughened cheek. Then she kissed me. It was a light pressing of lips but she lingered.

God, I’d missed her kisses. She was sweetly tentative and her lips trembled slightly against mine.

“Baby,” I whispered to her between kisses.

“I want you, Falcon.” Her voice wavered, and I thought I tasted tears on her lips.

“Please.”

“I’ll pleasure you, baby, but I’m not takin’ you. Not until this is over. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Even if I asked you to?”

“Especially if you asked me to. Honey, when you come to me, when you tell me you’re ready for me to fuck you, it’s not gonna be right before I leave. And it’s especially not gonna be when you’re worried about what’s gonna happen when I get home.” Very slowly, I rolled us over and settled my weight between her legs. She eagerly wrapped hers around my waist, tempting me with what we both wanted. “When I take you, it’s gonna be with the full knowledge that I’m never letting you go, Gina. You can’t believe me when I tell you I’ll be back for you. I understand, and that’s OK.”

“I never realized how chatty you were,” she grumbled before pulling me down for another kiss.

I had to chuckle against her lips. I wanted her more than I’d ever wanted a woman in my life! That I couldn’t have her was a gnawing pain, but it was more emotional than physical. She was one more person in my life I cared for that I could let down. She was strong, but so very fragile in many ways.

“Yeah, I’m a real chatterbox.” I kissed her neck before pushing off of her. “Do you want me to make you come, Gina?”

She sucked in a breath. “You’ll fuck me?”

I gave her a wry grin. “Afraid not. But I’ll eat your pussy until you scream. If that’s what you want.”

Looking away from me, Gina bit her bottom lip. I was afraid I might have pushed her too far, then she raised her arms to me and wound them around my neck. “I think I want that more than just about anything right now.”

Her words sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine. “Take off your shirt and shorts for me, baby. Your underwear too. Let me see your beautiful body.”

As she wiggled out of her clothes, I took the moment to whip off my shirt. I couldn’t fuck her, but I could press her naked body to mine. I needed the skin to skin contact with her. Even if it was only for a short time.

Once she was naked, I lowered myself to her, feeling the heat of her body rise to meet mine. The room was silent except for the soft rustle of the sheets and our mingled breaths. Carefully, I kissed her again, deeply, drinking in the moment, knowing it might need to last me through the coming days.

“Hold onto me,” I murmured against her lips, and she did, her fingers threading through my hair, pulling me closer.

I trailed kisses down her neck, each one a promise, a memory I wanted her to cling to while I was gone. By the time I reached her breasts, she was breathing heavily, her body arching toward me as if pulled by some magnetic force. My hands roamed over her skin, memorizing every curve and dip as though they were topography I needed to navigate by heart.

When my mouth finally found its way between her legs, Gina gasped sharply. Her grip on my hair tightened and her hips canted to my mouth.

“Mmm...” I hummed against her pussy, swiping my tongue from pussy to clit.

“Falcon!”

I smiled, feeling a mix of triumph and tenderness as I kissed her pussy once more. “That’s my girl,” I murmured. The mood shifted from heavy emotion to a gentler, more intimate connection as I prepared to make good on my promise of making her come.

Gina’s breath hitched in anticipation as she watched me, her eyes dark with desire and something more -- maybe hope, maybe fear. I could taste the urgency of this moment, knowing it was critical not only for the pleasure it promised but also for the reassurance I hoped to give her.

Every touch was calculated to comfort and excite as I traced my fingers along her inner thighs, eliciting shivers and soft moans that fueled my own desires. But tonight, it wasn’t about my needs. It was all for Gina, to give her something pure and unrestrained.

As I focused on her, everything else faded away -- the looming mission, the uncertainty of what lay ahead -- all of it dissolved into the background. All that mattered was Gina and the connection that pulsed between us, electric and undeniable.

I intensified my attention, circling and flicking her clit with precision, guided by her sharp intakes of breath and the way her body moved against me. Her hands in my hair grew more insistent, urging me closer. She was about to come. I could feel the tension coiling tightly within her.

“Gina,” I whispered against her skin, my voice rough with desire and an aching tenderness. “Let go for me, baby.”

Her response was a strangled cry, her body arching as she reached that crest. She screamed, a sound that echoed off the walls and reverberated deep in my chest. Her climax washed over her in waves, and I held her through it all, my mouth still

working gently to bring her down as softly as I could.

She cried out again, a sound mingled with my name and something like relief. In the aftermath, she lay trembling, her breaths coming in jagged sighs.

I pressed a gentle kiss to her bare mound before I crawled up beside her, our sweaty torsos sticking slightly as I pulled her into my arms. She nestled against my chest, still catching her breath. Her fingers traced idle patterns on my skin as we both lay there in the quiet.

“I’m scared,” she whispered after a while. Her voice was so faint I might have missed it if not for the stillness of the room. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I know you’re scared. You’re not gonna lose me, honey. Not as long as you’ll have me.” My hand stroked her hair in long, slow strokes. It soothed me. Like petting a contented kitten. “I swear it.”

“You don’t know that. What if she has a perfectly reasonable explanation and wants you back? What if she needs you?”

“Like I said, baby. She had any number of opportunities to let me know she was alive if she’d wanted to. Before she went over there to infiltrate that cell, anyway.”

“Sounds like she’s a hero.” Gina didn’t sound wistful or anything, just resigned.

“Yeah. If what Rocket was told is true, then yes. She is.”

“You know, I can never be that kind of woman. I’m not built for it.”

“Did anyone say you had to be a covert operative to be a hero? Sunshine and Rainbow think you’re a hero. Effie and Aneshya think you’re a hero. Luke too.”

“I don’t know about that. They like my cookies.”

“You think that’s why all of them, even Luke, are at your house several times a week begging for cooking lessons? Aneshya swears she’s gonna be a chef. Effie says she’s going to open her own bakery when she grows up. And Lemon caught Luke building a Cookies and Lemonade stand for the girls. You don’t think they’d have been so excited about all that if you hadn’t come into their lives, do you?”

She shrugged. “They might have.”

I chuckled and pulled her closer. “No, baby. They wouldn’t. Now. I need to get ready. I’ll come say goodbye before I leave. Let Lemon look after you. She’ll never admit it, but I think she needs to mother everyone. You’ll be doing me a favor because if she’s fussing over you, I might get started on this mission without her calling me Pigeon Nuts in front of anyone.” As I’d hoped, that got a small laugh from her. “That wasn’t much, but I’ll take it.” I smiled before kissing her once more, then heading to the bathroom to get ready.

Thirty minutes later, dressed and my duffle packed, I sat on the edge of the bed and once again, stroking my hand down the length of Gina’s hair. She blinked up at me, tears glistening in her lovely, copper-colored eyes.

“Be safe while I’m gone.”

“You’re the one going into danger. You be safe. I’ll be fine in the compound.”

“I’m telling Rocket and Lemon you’re my old lady. The club would look after you anyway, but if something happens to me, I want it official so there’s no pushback.” Then I frowned. “Except Lemon won’t allow there to be pushback. But I still want you to have my protection. So, while I’m gone, I’ll have Lemon put in an order for your property cut.”

Gina didn't really look convinced, but I could see how badly she wanted this. Wanted to be mine. I knew she was nervous. Under normal circumstances I'd never leave her for something like this. Especially not when our relationship was this new. But I couldn't let this go. I might not have known Joilyn was part of my team, but she still was. Which, in my mind, made it my responsibility to get her back. And I would. I was done letting down people I cared about.

"I'll look forward to it," she said softly, giving me a sad smile.

"Good. Get some rest. I'll be back before you know it."

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Gina

I spent most of my time at home. In my house. Lemon and some of the girls had come by every day, but I just couldn't get out and walk around the compound. It had only been twenty-four hours since Falcon left, but I had fallen into despondency. The man I was in love with was on a mission to save the woman he was supposed to marry. No reason to be down about that, right? Yeah, I was moping and I knew it.

I was curled up on the couch when I heard feminine laughter outside my door right before there was a loud pounding as someone knocked heavily.

"Open up, Gina! It's time for you to party. With us." Was that Lemon?

I stood and walked to the door. I was in leggings and the shirt Falcon had left in my bedroom. Silly, but it made me feel closer to him when I was fairly certain everything would change when he came back. When I opened the door, all the old ladies in Grim Road were there.

"Hi, Gina!" Olivia was the sweetest person. Her man, Bear, was one of the biggest men I'd ever seen. Appropriate as far as I was concerned. "We brought snacks and alcohol. We're gonna watch the Great British Baking Show and get schnozzled!" She gave me a bright smile along with a tight hug. "Everything's gonna be fine. Lemon won't let it be any other way."

Cecilia was next in hugging me. Of all the old ladies, Cecilia was the one I gravitated to the most. She'd been forced into prostitution. Bullet had claimed her after she'd been beaten nearly to death. We weren't close, but I thought she might be the one

woman in the club I semi-related to. And only because of what I'd gone through from Hammer in this same club.

"Lemon raided Bullet's stash of fruit punch. My advice is to lay off anything else if you drink any." Cecilia grinned. "Small sips over at least an hour."

Evelyn and Calista were next, each woman greeting me warmly. All the old ladies at Grim were wonderful. They'd all helped me so much. Lemon and her sister, Apple, had helped first. Lemon had been the one to get my story out of me. Then she had started the process of getting rid of my nightmare. As each woman had been claimed by one of Grim Road's members, they'd all been around regularly. If Lemon or their men had told them what had happened to me, none of them ever said. They never failed to check on me or include me in any family events held in this area of the compound.

"The kids wanted to come too," Lemon said, "but sometimes bitches need some bitch time with other bitches." That got a laugh from everyone. Even me.

We all piled into the living room, settling on my mismatched assortment of couches and chairs. Olivia popped open a bag of popcorn while Cecilia began setting up the TV for our baking show marathon. Calista brought in covered trays of snacks. There were cookies, chips, and even some homemade dips. Evelyn found a comfy corner on the sofa with a sizeable glass of punch she balanced on a small table beside her. I assumed this was the punch Cecilia had been talking about, but figured I'd ask before consuming any. I wasn't averse to getting stoned, I just didn't want any surprises.

This was the first time I'd really appreciated the friendship and solidarity these women always projected with each other. Even though I rarely let myself be drawn into their circle, this time, there was no doubt I was part of this exclusive sorority. These women were here because I needed them. Lemon had likely put out the call and they'd all answered.

Lemon sat down next to me, handing me a glass filled with ice and Bullet's notorious fruit punch, along with a big dollop of ice cream. Her eyes met mine, fierce yet kind. "We've got your front, side, and back, Gina. We always have. We always will." It was a soft exchange just between the two of us and I found myself smiling. Lemon gripped my shoulder before sitting back and propping her feet on the coffee table next to mine. "Stop thinking about what might happen when Falcon returns. Focus on now. We're all here and we care about you. Besides, if Falcon doesn't realize what a perfect old lady he would have with you, he really does have pigeon nuts."

I couldn't help but smile. I'd heard Lemon call Falcon Pigeon Nuts more than once. It always made Falcon scowl, but I thought he didn't mind it as much as he let on. I got the feeling that was just the way he and Lemon got along.

"You're right. I really appreciate all you guys have done for me. Both now and since all that shit... you know. Before." She was right, but I found it hard to shake off the heaviness in my chest. Lemon was good at many things, including reading people. She knew just how to coax someone out of their shell or, when needed, to give them a shove. The latter was never subtle.

It didn't take long for everyone to have a running, laughing commentary on each challenge in the show. Between bouts of laughter and sips of punch, I began to feel lighter, almost buoyant. Despite my initial reluctance, being surrounded by these wonderful women was slowly peeling away layers of my anxiety. Evelyn passed around a plate of cookies she'd baked herself, insisting they were better than anything on the baking show. "You see, it's all about adding that extra bit of love," she said, and winked.

"Christ, Evie." Apple rolled her eyes. "Can you get any more cheesy?"

We all laughed and Evelyn threw a pillow at Apple, hitting her in the face. Apple laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks, as did Evelyn.

The rest of the night was spent binge watching the rest of the current season. By the time the winner was decided, we were all drooping. And I was more than a little whacked from the fruit punch. Me and Lemon managed to get some blankets and pillows for everyone and we piled up on couch and chair cushions in the middle of the floor like kids at a sleepover.

I suppose that's what it was. I'd never had one, but it seemed fitting that these women were the ones at my first sleepover.

As I lay next to Cecilia, I looked at the other woman. She was on her side facing me and reached out her hand to grasp mine tightly. "It's going to be all right, Gina. Lemon won't let it be anything else."

"Yeah. I should have realized that. Sooner." The woman was a force of nature.

"Falcon and Lemon are at each other's throats most days, but she respects him. He'd have to be a good man to earn Lemon's respect."

"I know he's a good man. I don't know many men who would ride around on a pink bike just because I enjoy it."

Cecilia grinned and squeezed my hand again. "See? That's true love right there."

We both laughed, but I was ashamed to admit how that simple observation helped me relax. It was either that or the pot in the fruit punch. Could be either, but I thought it was that damned pink bike.

I closed my eyes and drifted for a long time before I finally let sleep drag me under. Then I didn't move until morning.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Falcon

“Hard to believe the one place that gives me fuckin’ nightmares is in fuckin’ Oklahoma.” Rattler muttered his objection as we approached the big ranch house where we thought Joilyn was being held. Crush and Byte had hooked up with ExFil’s intelligence crew and were helping coordinate the rescue. It wasn’t something Cain would normally allow, but the man understood our situation. Besides that, I thought he was trying to recruit some of Grim Road’s members to ExFil.

“We still looking at thirteen people on the grounds?” I peered through my field glasses, trying to spot as many people as I could. The last thing I wanted was to accidentally cut through the path of one guard trying to avoid another.

“Yep. Thirteen plus your girl,” Scout answered from my earpiece. He and another ExFil agent were on one side of the structure while me and Rattler were with three other ExFil team members.

“These guys look like they know what they’re doing.” I thought that was a guy called Goose. He and the team sniper, Deadeye, were positioned on a small hill about three hundred yards away. About the time he commented, someone ran out of the house, stumbling down the stairs, and bent over as he braced himself on the porch. Looked like he was puking. “At least, some of them know what they’re doing.” The last was a dry mutter.

“Data says he’s only found one device on any network in the house or surrounding areas,” Scout muttered. If he was anything like the rest of the team, he had his eyes firmly on the target.

Of our group, two out of the three were studying the house with binoculars. The third guy constantly swept the surrounding area but without the field glasses. His name was Chase. I thought he'd been part of a shady organization before he'd ended up in Bones MC with Cain and most of the ExFil team here currently.

“One ?” I couldn't help the question. “You mean like they truly are off the grid?”

“Seems that way. Cheetah, what are you seeing?” Cheetah was in her forties and one of the most cheerful people I'd ever met. It was almost sickening but the damned woman had me in stitches before we'd left for this operation, laughing at wartime stories of this team and others she'd served with. Goose had told me she had a knack for picking up on people's emotions and had known I was tense. I liked her immediately. She was completely different once we stepped in the vehicle to start this.

“Female target is in an upstairs room on the south side. I have a partial visual on her and it looks like she's shackled. I don't see her being out of line of sight without someone freeing her first.”

“Good, Cheetah. You're in charge of her.” Scout gave orders like a man well used to this kind of operation. He was thoughtful and deliberate, but confident in every intel question and every command given. “Deke, you have Cheetah's back.”

“Roger.”

“Deadeye, follow Cheetah, Deke, and Joilyn when they get her out of the house. Don't fire unless our team does first. That fifty cal is loud enough to wake half the fuckin' state.”

“No promises, Scout.” Though his words sounded defiant, it was Deadeye's version of humor. I'd learned that in the first few hours after meeting the team. They said the

man lightened up a little after meeting his woman, but if this was lighter, I'd have hated to see him before he'd met her.

"Tool. Clutch. Take our guests and go hunting." Scout's command was hard as steel. Unbending. "No one leaves this place alive except us and Joilyn." That was our cue to get this fuckin' shit over with.

The four of us took off toward the ranch, crouching in the tall brush grass. The moon was bright and only half obscured through the clouds but still brighter than I'd like. I was glad for the night vision goggles we'd been issued, even if the things were clunky as shit. Laughter filtered to us as the guys in front made fun of their buddy currently bent double and vomiting everything he'd ever eaten since conception. Much as I hated giving these guys a reprieve, the noise was the cover we needed if Scout was intent on making as little noise as possible.

"Leave the dumbasses up front?" I whispered, already starting to make my way around them before Scout confirmed my request.

"The guys on the perimeter got little to no LOS on the guys in the back. Falcon, go with Tool and take the eastern perimeter. Rattler and Clutch can take the west. Cheetah, once those two teams meet in the back to take out the rest outside the house, you and Deke start your move inside the house. Should be good to move once you get there. Sound off as each area is clear."

Yeah. If only things always went that smooth. The closer we moved to the house, the more my anxiety ratcheted up. If there was any doubt this place had given me PTSD, it was erased. I kept expecting to hear shots ringing out, people screaming. As I looked to my left, I spotted Rattler and fully expected to see his head explode. It had happened the last time. I'd turned to give an order and the man to my left had been shot with a gun so big, his head disintegrated.

I tried to shake it off and keep moving forward. It was hard, though. The kills were easy. It was the one thing I could do to keep the panic at bay. We had to go slow, so I could concentrate on each movement and keep myself aware of where the rest of my team was.

Once we made it behind the house, I had firm control of my emotions. Yes, I was still stressed. I doubted I'd be able to relax until I was back in the Grim Road compound. And I wasn't altogether certain it was because I felt safe there.

Everyone sounded off their kill as we cleared the perimeter around the house.

My gaze found Rattler's when we raised our night vision as we entered the house ahead of Cheetah and Deke. He gave a short nod and we started a search of the house.

"Front room, east side," Goose said over the radio. "Spotted two guys in front of the window."

"I got 'em," someone acknowledged.

"Whoever has the phone just made a call." I didn't recognize this man's voice either, but suspected it was one of the computer guys with ExFil.

"I got him." Crush's voice was immediate. Just knowing one of my own men was listening in, helping, eased my anxiety drastically. "Going to a local number three clicks to the north of you. It's a hardware store in town."

"Yeah. These guys own a business. Fine upstanding citizens with a federal agent held hostage in their farmhouse."

That gave me pause. Once we'd cleared the house, I spoke my concerns. "I'm assuming there's a reason local law enforcement -- or any law enforcement, really --

isn't involved with this, Scout?"

"Might shoulda asked that question before you came along, but yeah. There is."

"That'll do, I guess."

"Good. Cheetah. I assume you have the woman?"

"I do. She's a little banged up but not hurt."

That eased my worry for Joilyn, but also sent my mind whirling. "She's been with these fucks for two years. How's she not hurt?"

"Can we save twenty questions for after we're on the road or, preferably, in the air?" Scout was losing his patience.

I ground my teeth together. "Fuckin' hate spooks."

"Same. You know, even though we were employed by them at one time." Rattler moved past me to cover Cheetah when she came downstairs with Joilyn. Deke had the rear so I covered the flank.

The second we stepped into the clearing around Scout and Tool we loaded everything into two trucks. I was with Rattler guarding the trucks in case we missed someone or reinforcements arrived. The last thing we wanted to happen was to get someone hurt now. Scout tapped me on the shoulder and I nudged Rattler. I jumped into the back of one truck, Rattler got in the back of the other, and we all sped off.

The ride to the private airfield where we'd left the plane took an hour, and by the time we pulled into the barn at the front of the strip, I had a raging headache, likely from a combination of adrenaline letdown and trying to focus intently on everything around

us. And I had barely laid eyes on Joilyn.

I met Rattler as the team covered Cheetah, Joilyn, and Deke, making them board the plane first. When we were all inside and the plane was in the air bound for Florida, I finally relaxed. I needed a moment to close my eyes and center myself. I'd been so focused on getting everyone in and out without anyone getting killed, I hadn't thought about Joilyn beyond explaining to Gina who she was. Now, I had questions. A lot of fucking questions.

Rattler was already in the back of the plane where Joilyn sat with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders while an older woman assessed her injuries. The plane wasn't overly fancy to be a corporate aircraft but was comfortable. Kind of like I imagined a private jet owned by a paramilitary corporation might be. It held our team easily enough with enough room for us to stretch our legs without being in each other's way.

I took a breath and stood to go to Rattler where he sat with Joilyn. My gaze locked on hers and she met mine with what I thought was a mixture of defiance and regret in her expression. It was always hard to read Joilyn. She'd always been able to keep her feelings close to the vest. Looked like she hadn't changed much.

"You're not too worse for wear, dear. I think you'll soon have your strength back." The older woman squeezed Joilyn's shoulder as she stood. The woman turned her gaze on me and Rattler, sticking her hand out to my MC brother. "I'm Mama. I serve Bones MC as their doctor. Cain sometimes uses my services with ExFil. He thought Joilyn would be more comfortable with a woman looking after her, but I think she's OK."

"I'm Rattler and this is Falcon." Rattler introduced us as Mama took my hand in a firm grip. "Joilyn's my sister."

Mama gave me a questioning look.

“I’m Rattler’s friend. Joilyn and I had planned on getting married, but that was two years ago.” I saw Joilyn’s face harden before she masked her expression once more. What the fuck else was I supposed to say? I didn’t want to hurt Joilyn, but the fact was, for whatever reason, she’d faked her death long before whatever had happened to put her here.

“I see.” Mama gave me a knowing look, like she really did see. She squeezed my arm as she passed me.

I glanced at Rattler who studied his sister intently. The others had given us some privacy by sitting as far forward as they could so we had the back of the plane to ourselves. He crossed the short distance and took Joilyn in a hard embrace and the two clung to each other for long moments. When she pulled back, there was a glimpse of the Joilyn I knew. There was something vulnerable about her before that simply wasn’t there now. Rattler was right. I had changed. All three of us had.

“Joi? You’re safe now. You know that, right?” Rattler brushed hair off her forehead gently.

Joilyn gave him an angry, impatient look and shoved away from him. “Of course I know I’m safe, Ruben.”

Rattler raised an eyebrow. “I only say that because you’ve been a prisoner for the last two years and all that.” There was a bite to his voice I hadn’t expected. Probably in response to Joilyn’s display of temper. Rattler had never been anything but gentle with his sister. This tone of voice had the tendency to give most men pause.

Joilyn’s eyes widened and she actually drew back slightly before sticking her chin in the air defiantly. “You don’t know everything about my life. Everything I did was for

a purpose. I stayed embedded in that group as long as I could. It was just my bad luck to have run into someone who knew me in town.”

“You mean, someone who thought you were dead?” Yeah, Rattler was good and angry. I couldn’t say I blamed him, but given how hard he’d taken her death and how he believed he should have protected Joilyn better, I should have expected him to lash out.

“Easy, Rattler,” I murmured. “She’s here. She’s alive and relatively unharmed. Be thankful you have your sister back.”

Rattler closed his eyes, sucking in a breath. Then another one. “You’re right. I’m so sorry, Joi.” He met his sister’s gaze again. “Your death was hard on me.” He glanced at me. “On both of us.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I knelt in front of her. “What happened, Joi?” I kept waiting for that sense of betrayal, probably the same thing Rattler was feeling, but it hadn’t come. Probably because I was still crashing from the adrenaline letdown.

“Not sure what you mean.”

“With you, Joi. Did you fake your own death?”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate. “With the help of the CIA.”

“Why?” My question came out more like a demand. Which it was.

She lifted her chin. “That’s classified.”

“Bullshit.” I didn’t raise my voice, but didn’t let her get away with the cop-out. “You owe me this, Joilyn. You owe both of us an explanation.”

“Look. Both of you were already in the Marines. You were serving your country and proud of it. I wanted to do that too.”

“No one said you couldn’t.” Rattler raised his hands in a pleading gesture. “I wouldn’t have liked it much, but I’d have helped you all I could. What exactly happened?”

She rubbed her eyes tiredly and winced when a bruise on her face protested. “I did enlist. You guys were deployed. I was going to tell you after basic. But I ticked every box the CIA special ops program was looking for at the time. They said my lack of actual combat experience would work in their favor because they could train me the way they wanted me to operate. The only catch was, I had to leave my life behind. Disappear permanently.”

“Christ, Joi! You were eighteen! You couldn’t make a decision like that on your own.”

“All evidence to the contrary,” she replied dryly. Rattler gave her a venomous look and she sighed. “In hindsight, yeah. I can see how it was a bad choice. But I’m not sure discussing it with you would have changed my mind. They were training me to do important things. Things to keep our country safe. I was going to make a difference and I did. The work I did in Oklahoma helped head off at least three different major domestic attacks.”

“The CIA doesn’t operate inside the US, Joilyn.”

“Not usually, no. But there is a domestic division. Project MK-ULTRA and the attempt to suppress the Warren Report are just a couple of examples. Not to mention

they had an office under a different name in the World Trade Center on 9/11. Officially, we were operating in Oklahoma because we had tracked a foreign national with ties to multiple terrorist originations.”

Rattler snorted. “That the company line?”

“Exactly.” Joilyn pointed at her brother, like he’d just proved her point. “It was an excuse. A reason for them to be operating in the area when your team got killed.”

“So, if you weren’t there to stop a terrorist plot, why were you there? And why did you stay there after everything went to shit?”

“It was a hit. Pure and simple.”

“A hit. That the CIA took on personally. Even covering and creating excuses for them being there? That makes no sense at all.”

“When have you ever known a government agency to make sense?”

I raised an eyebrow at Rattler. “She’s got you there.”

“Not helping, Falcon.”

“Not trying to. And I’m not buying it.”

“It took me a while to figure out what was going on and who I could trust. And I’m talking about people inside the agency. Staying with this bunch was a calculated risk, but I knew I could manage these guys. They’re mean, resourceful, and great at hunting squirrels and deer. But well versed in covert ops, they are not. Once I was in with them, I played the part easily enough. Since I didn’t have to contact my handler right away because I wasn’t sure I could trust him, I didn’t risk getting caught. By the

time I'd worked it all out, things had died down here and gotten back to normal. Normal being a lesson in paranoid delusions within moderately sized groups. They didn't see women as a threat. Just someone to help them when they needed it. I blended in with the other women, cooking and cleaning and keeping the kids out of the men's way."

"How long had you been in place before the raid?" Rattler was starting to relax a little. Like me, I was sure he was feeling the adrenaline letdown.

"About six weeks. Not long. Long enough to establish patterns. There wasn't supposed to be anyone but the guys at the house the night of the raid. All of the women and children were supposed to be gone on a picnic off grounds. There weren't that many of us and most of the time, only me and one other woman were there. But that day, it rained. I got word out to my handler, but he said it was too late. The operation had already started.

"I honestly didn't care if the women were there or not. They knew what they were doing, that those guys were homegrown terrorists, and they chose to stay with them. But there was no way I could let those three kids be put in danger. So I sounded the alarm." She closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. One tear slid down her cheek, but she ignored it. "I thought if they were ready, the team coming in would see they'd lost the element of surprise and at least pull back and reassess."

"We questioned that, Rattler," I whispered. "Do you remember?"

"Yeah. We both thought it odd, but I wasn't worried. I knew we could take them."

"We asked for instructions but were told to proceed anyway," Rattler told her. "It wasn't until we saw the kids running toward the property line we realized there were innocents on the ground."

“There were only three kids, but you had no way of knowing there weren’t any inside. I knew it would make things difficult, but what I didn’t know was how many weapons they had hidden away in the storm cellar, or what kind. I had no fucking idea! I damn sure didn’t know about the armor-piercing rounds or the mortars.” She shivered. “If I’d been more experienced, or had more time to have studied the place, I’m sure I’d have found their cache. Instead, the timetable got moved up, and there we were.”

“You said they were trying to kill someone. Who did they target?”

“Right. One of the guys funding that particular group is the son of an exceedingly wealthy and powerful businessman in the area. He’s local, but make no mistake, the man is a silent world powerhouse. As you probably figured out, the place was pretty much completely off the grid. I had to get creative in my digging. Thankfully, I had a few friends in place who I trusted to keep me being alive a secret. We did some work and it looked like the father wanted the son killed. While he is definitely rich enough to kill someone and get away with it, his son being killed might raise a few eyebrows. But, if they could spin it so that it looked like his son had been kidnapped and killed by a bunch of trigger-happy militants bent on blowing up buildings and killing members of law enforcement, he could go on sitting quietly in the shadows. This guy had to have gone to someone high up in the CIA and presented it to set up a smoke screen for future operations inside the US. Kind of like a dress rehearsal in information control in domestic operations.”

“Christ, this sounds like something out of a fuckin’ movie.” Rattler scrubbed a hand over his face in agitation.

“You worked for the fucking CIA too,” Joilyn snapped. “Tell me this doesn’t sound like something they’d do.” When Rattler gave her a look, she continued. “I don’t have all the answers, guys. But I do know that the son was trouble. Like the psychotic kind of trouble. And the father’d had all he was gonna take. When the son started

plotting to blow up buildings and shoot up parks and courthouses, his father snapped. Rather than have his family name associated with something like the Oklahoma City Bombing, he chose to take the chance it would slip to the press his son was killed in that raid. If the press got wind of his son being killed, the official press release was supposed to play it as his son had been part of a CIA raid. So, of course the press did find out. That was the whole point of the mission underneath the mission only a very few people knew about. The report leaked did not say the man was acting with the CIA or against it. Only that he was among the several agents killed during the raid.”

My eyes widened. “Felix Newton. He was the son.”

“Isn’t his dad a US senator or something?” asked Rattler.

Joilyn winced. “Yeah. I’m so going to jail for treason or some shit. ‘Cause, you know, that’s all classified.”

“You’re not going to jail,” Rattler said firmly. “You’ll come back with us. It’s why the club exists.”

“You mean Grim Road? Yeah, Cheetah said I’d probably be offered the chance to go back with you. She said if I wanted to stay hidden, that’s where I needed to go.”

“She’s right.” I thought I should probably reach out to Joilyn, to reassure her she’d have a home with us if she wanted it, but found myself reluctant to take her hand. Instead, I smiled. “The agency knows you’re alive because they called ExFil to get you out. Right?”

“That’s something that’s up for debate.” Joilyn eyed me carefully, as if she sensed my reluctance to have physical connection with her. “If my handler didn’t tell his superiors, he might have called ExFil himself outside agency channels. It’s even possible ExFil thinks they’re doing this for the agency when it’s really unsanctioned.”

“Who’s your handler?”

“I only know him by his road name.”

“Hello, Joilyn.” Scout approached us, reaching out his hand. “I’m Scout.”

Her lips parted on a gasp. “Scout? My handler?”

“Yep. That’s me. So, to answer your question, no. The CIA doesn’t know you’re still alive. I’m sorry it took me so long to arrange a rescue.”

“Well, it did take me months to contact you. I wasn’t sure who I could trust.”

“And you waited patiently for me to work with Cain to get things in place to get you outta there. While you did, you were able to get back information that stopped people from being killed. I could have worked something out quicker, but you weren’t in immediate danger. I wanted to make sure we did this cleanly. That way you have the option to make a break if you want. We’ll help you get a new identity so you can have a normal life.”

Joilyn snorted. “Define normal.”

“Good point.” Scout grinned. “We’re headed to Florida. While these guys don’t let outsiders in their compound, Salvation’s Bane MC’s compound will. You can clean up and rest a few days, then decide what you want to do.”

Joilyn looked from Rattler to me before nodding her head. “Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.”

“And for the record, guys...” Scout raised an eyebrow as his gaze slid from me to Rattler. “She’s right about what happened with the raid. The whole thing was an

elaborate set-up. What they learned about how information spreads organically before it's picked up by algorithms and shit will be the way they delay information getting to the public in the future."

I stared at Joilyn. Really looked at her. She appeared the same as she did the last day I saw her. Dark auburn hair and green eyes, that stubborn chin and athletic figure were very familiar to me. But I didn't see her the same way I used to. When I thought about marrying a woman, making a home, I didn't see those clear, green eyes looking up at me or the sprinkling of freckles across her nose as she smiled. I saw sparkling copper eyes framed by chestnut-colored ringlets. I saw the look of near hero worship in her eyes when she looked up at me and let my chest swell with pride even though I knew I didn't deserve her. I saw Gina.

I stood to go back to my seat. I had a lot to think about. Mainly about how quickly I could get my property cut around Gina's slim shoulders. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it had been a mistake to come here. Sure, I could say I'd been there for Rattler. The man was my best friend. But the truth was, I'd felt obligated. And maybe a small part of me had thought I wanted her to tell me she hadn't had a choice. I now knew that had been my biggest mistake of all. I didn't want Joilyn. I never had. Not the way I wanted Gina.

"Falcon," Joilyn called out as I walked away. "Can I talk with you before you go up front?" She glanced at Rattler. "Alone?"

"Yeah. Guess we have a lot to talk about."

"Is there someplace private we can go?" Joilyn asked in a louder voice, obviously asking someone else in the plane other than me or Rattler.

Scout looked from me to her and shrugged. "Sure." He led us to a door at the back of the plane. The door opened to a study. There was a small, curved desk in one corner

and a leather sectional couch in the other. “It’ll be a few hours before we land. Take all the time you need.”

He shut the door, and Joilyn and I just stood there. For the first time since I actually got a look at her, she seemed uncertain. Like she was at a loss of how to proceed. Then she crossed the short distance to the couch and sat. I parked my ass on the desk, not knowing exactly what to do. I didn’t want to crowd her, and I also needed to keep my distance. The very last thing that could happen now was for her to get the impression I thought we should pick up where we left off.

“You won’t sit by me?” She tilted her head looking confused.

“I don’t think it’s the best idea, Joilyn.”

She ducked her head, her hair hiding her face. Then she took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry, Jacob.” She’d been so strong and tough up to this point, when her face crumbled and she started weeping silently, it nearly broke my heart. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I wanted to make a difference.”

“You did, honey. Scout says you saved lives by staying put.”

“I almost got you and Ruben killed,” she said softly. “Everyone else died. I know because Scout told me when I first contacted him. That’s on me. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t have answers for questions like that, Joi. But, it honestly doesn’t sound like it. You tried to warn us. To keep children from getting caught in the crossfire. I’d rather have died myself than accidentally harmed a child. Besides, their hidden agenda sounded like something they’d say was worth the collateral damage. It’s not the people like us in the field who are evil. It’s the people pulling our strings to get us to do things we wouldn’t normally do. Then, they hold those things over our heads to get us to do more things we wouldn’t normally do.”

She gave me a startled look, like she was only just now working that out for herself. “So, it wasn’t that the operation had already begun. It was that they didn’t care.”

“I’m afraid so, Joi. Me and Rattler learned those subtleties in the Marines. You went straight into the fire pit. You had no hope of besting anyone in that agency. Manipulation is what they do. The higher in rank, the better they are at it.”

“I gave up everything. Didn’t I?” She looked devastated and I hurt for her. I really did.

“Not everything. You’ve still got your brother. And me, but as a friend. As my best friend’s sister.”

“Like when I was a kid.”

“Yeah.”

Joilyn looked up at me then, tears swimming in her lustrous eyes. “Did you find someone else?”

I didn’t want to hurt her, but there was really no easy way to do this. “I did. It was after I first came to Grim Road. Right after that night.”

“So you’ve been with her for more than a year?”

“No. I met her then, but didn’t have a relationship with her until recently.”

“So, it’s still new?” I wasn’t sure I liked the look on Joilyn’s face now. It was calculating, where that had never been part of her personality. It set off some alarm bells I wasn’t sure I liked and wasn’t going to dwell on now. I wasn’t up for that kind of emotional rollercoaster.

“It is, but it’s also cemented. I really am sorry, Joilyn. I would never have hurt you on purpose.”

“We were going to be married, Jacob. Be together forever.”

“You died . You fuckin’ died !” That came out harsher than I wanted it to, but I felt guilty enough without this. “I know I let you down, OK? It seems to be my superpower. I’ll help you in any way I can. I’ll make sure you have a safe place among people you can trust. I’ll have Lemon get someone at Grim to assess your skills and vouch for you with ExFil, if that’s what you want. Maybe Scout can help with that since he knows you. I’ll do everything I can to help you. But I love Gina.”

“Didn’t you love me once too? Doesn’t our past count for something?” She stood and crossed to me, putting her hand on my chest.

I caught her wrists and gently put her at arm’s length. “Don’t, Joilyn. I’m not yours to touch.”

“You should be, though,” she said softly. “You said when you left we’d get married when you came home. I thought I’d have time to finish my service before you were out, then we’d have more in common.”

I narrowed my eyes. This wasn’t... this wasn’t the Joilyn I knew. Sure, we’d both changed, but I was getting whiplash with her emotional swings. “You knew going in it was a one-way trip. Why are you upset now?”

She shrugged. “Maybe because the man I love found another woman?” Now she looked angry. “Look. I get you needed to have a fling. I did too. But we can be back together now. Besides, I had you first. I should get to say if you stay with me or not.”

“What’s wrong with you, Joi? Not only are you not making any sense, you’ve set

down some very unreasonable expectations.”

Taking a step toward me she reached out once more. Slowly this time until she lay one hand on my chest over my heart. “I just want us to be a team, Jacob.” She looked at the door once and took another half step forward, lowering her voice like she was afraid someone would overhear us. “Listen. If you come back with me, we can work together. We’d be unstoppable. Just think of all the good we could do. Together.”

“Is that what this is about?” I straightened from the desk, forcing her to take a step backward before she realized she was giving ground. “To get me back in the CIA?”

“Why not? They said you were good. And, like I said, we could work together. Me, you, maybe even Rattler. It’d be like old times.” It hadn’t missed my notice that her tears had dried. I wasn’t delving too deep here because I honestly didn’t want to know. Instead, I make a mental note to tell Lemon not to let her anywhere near the Grim Road compound and have a talk with Rattler about my suspicions. I had no doubt now what had happened, and it involved the CIA getting someone inside Grim Road to get an idea of how many of us and exactly who was there. After all, most of us had been affiliated with the CIA in some form, especially once we started running black ops.

“No. It won’t.” I moved around her to the door, intending to leave.

“I still love you, Falcon.” She stated the words with such conviction, I couldn’t tell if it was an act or not. “I always will. I’m willing to die for you.”

I shut the door with a hard thud before advancing on Joilyn. “Is that a threat?” I bared my teeth at her and she recoiled. But, again, I saw something in her eyes that said she wasn’t at all intimidated by me.

“What? That I’d kill myself? You can rest assured I’d never take my own life,

Falcon.”

“No. I don’t think you would. But that wasn’t the threat. The threat was in what you didn’t say. You’re willing to die for me. But I’m also betting you’re willing to kill.”

She shrugged. “Dying’s much harder than killing.”

“Oh, dying can most certainly be harder than killing. Especially if you hurt someone who belongs to me. I’m going to pretend I don’t know what your assignment is. But don’t expect to get into Grim Road. You’ll have to figure something else out.”

That drew what seemed to be a genuinely shocked expression from her. “What?”

“I’ll go tell your... handler you’re not getting into Grim Road and to make some other arrangements for you.”

“You said you’d help me.”

“And I will. But living at Grim Road is not on the table.” Once again, I turned to go. I needed to think about what I was going to do next. Which meant staying longer than I’d planned at Salvation’s Bane. I needed to get in touch with Lemon. Tell her what was going on. But most of all, I needed her to bring Gina with her. I absolutely could not spend another night away from her. “Joilyn? If you can get out of the CIA, you need to do it now. Scout said he didn’t tell them, but I’m betting you told them. They told you to use Scout to get inside Grim Road. If you want out, Scout can help you. But you’re not getting into Grim Road, whether you leave them or not. You might want to consider making the appropriate apology to Scout so you at least have the option of exiting the agency for real this time. Before they have you doing things you can’t come back from.”

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Gina

Falcon texted me to let me know he was good and on a plane heading home. I wanted to call him but figured he'd reach out to me if he could. Since I had no idea what was involved with calling home when he was on an assignment, I didn't know the protocol. I couldn't help but constantly look out the window, hoping to see him coming home. True to her word, Lemon didn't leave my side for the entire three days since Falcon had left.

It had now been several hours since I'd gotten that text and no word. I was starting to get worried. What if something had happened to him?

"Rocket says everything's fine." Lemon read the message from her phone. "He said they were meeting at Salvation's Bane and he'll be by to get us in a bit."

"You mean, leave the compound?" My heart rate sped up. I wasn't sure I was ready for that. I heard the women talk. Falcon was pretty popular. Seeing one of them touch him, or having them compete for his attention might break me at this point. I'd latched on to him, even believing he would eventually break my heart.

"No one's gonna hurt you, you know." Lemon spoke gently, covering my hand with hers and squeezing lightly. Lemon wasn't overly demonstrative toward others, but she did offer affection when she considered it necessary. "I won't let them."

"You're not much older than me, Lemon. How do you wield so much power so effortlessly?"

She gave me an almost evil smile. “I sacrifice the genitals of all the men whose balls I’ve busted. Highly recommend it. Keeps a happy home.” I couldn’t help but laugh. Whatever happened after all this, I would always be grateful for Lemon’s friendship.

There was a rumbling of a vehicle outside the house and Lemon stood, tugging me to my feet. “That’s Rocket. He’s takin’ us to the Bane compound. Knox and Bear are following us so we’ll have room to bring home Falcon and Rattler.”

I glanced around the room. Cecilia and Olivia were here now. The others had been rotating sitting with me and Lemon. Also, the kids had been over during the day. We’d made and eaten so many cookies I was afraid they might turn into one. Lemon had told me numerous times she wanted Grim Road to be a home. Well, as far as I was concerned, she’d succeeded in spades.

We rode in silence. I was too nervous to carry on a conversation, but it only took us twenty minutes to get there anyway. By the time we rolled inside the chain-link fence I really thought I was going to throw up.

There were several people outside, talking, drinking beer, smoking. They appeared somber, but friendly.

“Give them a minute.” A man with the title “President” and the name “Thorn” approached us. He’d just come from inside.

“Everything OK?” Lemon asked softly.

“I think so.” Thorn shrugged. “Suffice it to say, they all have things to work out.”

“Fuck you, Jacob!” An irate-looking woman stomped out of the building. “I didn’t do anything the two of you didn’t do! I just had to disappear for a little while! Tell me you didn’t do the same thing, then come talk to me about the future.” She stabbed a

finger in the direction of the door just as Falcon and Rattler followed her out.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Falcon called after her. “I’ll help you with whatever you need.”

“I need my fiancé and my brother to support me in my career!” As Falcon got close, she lunged into him and shoved his chest hard. Falcon didn’t budge, but he didn’t reach for her like I thought he might. “I did what I did because the Marines and the CIA told me I had exceptional talent. If you can’t deal with that, maybe I don’t need you in my life, even if I still want you!”

“Joilyn, you left us.” Rattler reached for his sister but she batted at his hands, stepping further away from him. “We both thought you were dead. Why didn’t you at least tell us what was going on?” Rattler still held out his hand, pleading with his sister. “It’s been three years. How were we supposed to know you were undercover?” Both men were focused squarely on Joilyn. I doubt they even realized they had an audience.

I winced. “This was a bad idea. Maybe I should go.” My voice was tight as my throat closed up. I’d expected this, but it still hurt. Someone put a hand on my shoulder and turned me around, pulling me into their arms for a tight hug. It took a moment to realize it was Lemon.

“I-I sh-shouldn’t be h-here. I w-want to g-go h-home.” The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by the men from Grim Road and Venus. She and Piston were regulars in the Grim Road compound, though Venus was actually a member of Salvation’s Bane. I’d heard they’d been given memberships into several clubs and now acted kind of like ambassadors or mediators or something for all the clubs Grim was active with.

“Come on, little one,” Venus murmured to me. Lemon passed me off to the other woman. Venus and Piston urged me away from the clubhouse. I hadn’t even gone inside. “It will be all right.”

“I d-don’t know why I c-came.” I tried to keep my voice steady, but wasn’t sure how well I managed it. “This was a s-stupid idea.”

“Was not,” Piston said gruffly. “Seems to me someone is regretting her life choices and taking it out on the people who love her. Don’t worry. Your man’s not letting her manipulate him.”

“I can’t --” I sucked in a breath. “I can’t w-watch this.”

Venus wrapped an arm around me while Piston led the way back to the garage. When I stumbled, Piston grunted, but scooped me up into his arms and strode into the building. Venus said something and Piston grunted again.

“I’ll sit with her. You go make sure Falcon doesn’t have his head up his ass.” Piston had set me on a bench and Venus sat beside me, her arm going around me and pulling me to her.

“He’s good. I’m more worried about Joilyn. I don’t think she’s mentally stable.”

Piston turned and jogged out of the garage and I was left with Venus. She still had her arms around me, patting me like a mother might an upset child.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“No reason for you to apologize,” Venus reassured me in her soft Russian accent. “Falcon messaged Lemon to bring you to Salvation’s Bane. He wanted you here, Gina. Don’t give up on him.”

“H-He did?” I hated that I looked up at Venus with the hope that suddenly blossomed in me, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted Falcon. I wanted him to be my own. I... I loved him.

“He did. He knew Joilyn was coming home and he still chose you.”

“He d-didn’t even l-look at me.”

“He will.” Venus continued with the comforting arm around me, while she stroked my hair with the other. I was ashamed to admit how hard I clung to her.

“I never used to be this clingy,” I admitted to Venus as I desperately tried to get myself under control. “Never had anyone to cling to.”

“And that’s shame, little sister.” Venus didn’t let me go, but continued to comfort me when I felt like I was going to shatter. “You should have always have had someone to cling to when you hurt.”

I’d just started to calm down when I heard raised voices outside and getting closer. I cringed, shrinking back. Venus let me go, but didn’t move away completely.

“You’re being unreasonable, Joilyn. You can’t expect Falcon to just pick up where you two left off. He’s not the same person he was and neither are you.” Falcon and Rattler entered the garage with Joilyn, who bristled with anger, her back ramrod straight.

“It hasn’t been that long!” Joilyn argued back.

“Three. Three years , Joi. Three years where he went through just as much hell as you did. We both did. Not just from the night that fuckin’ mission went to shit, but from your death .” Rattler crossed his arms over his chest and stood between Joilyn and the exit. Though the smaller door where Rattler stood was open, the larger bays were closed.

“I was in a military compound, Ruben! Doing my part to stop domestic terrorism. I

was cut off from everyone and everything!”

“You got word to your handler. He could have gotten word to me. Or Falcon?”

She shrugged. “I was on a mission. One that went to shit and back. I didn’t have time to give him a list of people to contact.”

“You were told when you entered the program you’d be severing ties with everyone, Joilyn.” Another man entered the garage, but from inside the main clubhouse. “You knew there was no going back.”

“I can’t believe you let her do this, Scout,” Rattler snapped. “How the fuck did you end up being her handler, huh? You recruited her, didn’t you?” Rattler was furious. He was up in Scout’s face, yelling at the other man.

Scout raised his hands and took a step back. “Hey, Rattler. Ease up, man. I inherited Joilyn from the woman who recruited her.” Scout tilted his head. “No, actually, that’s not true. I found out Joilyn was your sister and I bullied my way into being her handler. It’s part of the reason she didn’t fully trust me. She and I hadn’t been working together that long before they imbedded her.”

“Why didn’t you pull her the fuck out?” Rattler stepped even closer to Scout and I knew the two were likely going to come to blows.

“You think I didn’t want to? She was perfect for what they needed. They shaped her specifically for these kinds of infiltrations. They weren’t letting her go for any reason. They needed her right where she was.”

“They same as got her killed, Scout. If you’re not lying, they think she’s dead.”

Scout’s mien hardened. “You don’t believe me? Talk to Cain. I don’t keep secrets

from Cain, especially if they affect ExFil.”

“Ease up, man.” Falcon had come up behind Rattler and gripped his shoulder. “He did what he could to help Joilyn. Ultimately, he’s responsible for getting her out. Killin’ him would be a shit way to say thanks.”

I trembled where I stood. Venus was still with me. I had no idea when I’d moved closer to the small group and I knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but all I could see was Falcon. I needed to touch him. To have him hold me. I knew I couldn’t interrupt, but I needed to know he was really OK.

He glanced over, his gaze capturing mine in an instant as though he could feel my desperate need for reassurance. Our eyes met across the tension-filled room, and something in his expression softened. He excused himself from the heated discussion and walked toward me, his steps determined yet gentle.

As Falcon approached, Venus subtly shifted aside, giving us space. My heart raced as he stopped in front of me, his large hands reaching out to gently cup my face. “Gina,” he murmured, voice thick with emotion. “I’m so sorry. I should never have left you for this. Scout and ExFil had it covered.”

I couldn’t speak. The words were lodged somewhere deep within my throat, choked by tears and relief. Instead, I leaned into him, closing the gap between us. His arms enveloped me in a protective embrace, a haven from the storm swirling around us. The warmth of his body was a solid reminder that he was real, alive, and here with me.

“I was so scared,” I admitted into Falcon’s chest, my voice muffled by his leather jacket. “Were you hurt?”

“No, baby. Not a scratch. I swear.”

I wasn't sure how to ask the next question, but I figured it was better to just get it out as quickly as I could. I took a breath. "Are you going back to her? I mean, I understand. You were supposed to get married."

"Gina, no. We'll talk about it all later, but no. Even if you weren't my woman, I wouldn't go back to Joilyn. She made her choices and they didn't include being my wife."

"I'm so sorry, Falcon."

"Don't be, honey. Joilyn and I would never have worked together. Not in the long run. Besides, I much prefer the woman I have now."

"I'm broken." I shook my head as I looked up at him. I felt so helpless. The only time in my life I hadn't felt helpless was when I was in his arms. "I'm not sure I'll ever be whole."

"That's a good thing. Because I'm broken too. Maybe if we stick together, we can complete each other."

Falcon

The second my gaze landed on Gina's sweet face, I thought maybe I'd finally done something right. The second I wrapped my arms around her, I knew with absolute certainty I'd come home.

I held her tightly, burying my face in her hair. It probably made me look weak to clutch her so tightly, but I didn't care. It wasn't like I was ever going to be an officer in Grim Road. They were my brothers and knew I'd defend them to the death. Who gave a fuck what another club thought?

"Thank you for coming, baby. I know it was hard for you. I just wasn't sure how long we were going to have to stay here before going back to Grim Road and I didn't think I could wait even a couple of hours to see you." It was the fucking truth.

"I was afraid. But I couldn't not come."

"Afraid for your safety?" I could understand her fear, though I'd hoped she'd realized we would protect her as our own. She was one of us and we were learning to support each other. In fact, once Lemon had gotten started on us, we'd all taken to it like we would have if we'd had our own families in a normal world. Seemed we all wanted the same thing and just hadn't wanted to admit it to anyone.

"Oh, no! Not at all. I trust Lemon and Rocket. They wouldn't let me come if they thought there was danger."

"Then what, baby? What were you scared of?" I kissed her head, loving that she

clung to me just as hard as I did her.

“Of losing you. I don’t know what happened to her but I’m sure you still love her.”

I thought about that. “I suppose I do, in a way. I knew her a long time before we ever got together.” I sighed. “I haven’t really had time to examine my feelings, but the one thing I’m absolutely certain of is, I want you, Gina.”

She didn’t say anything else, but I could feel her body shaking as she cried. I glanced over at Rattler. He and Scout hadn’t come to blows yet, but judging by Rattler’s expression, the jury was still out on how long a reprieve Scout got. But for now, it seemed they were going to be civil.

Gina stiffened in my arms and I turned my head. Joilyn was staring at us with hot anger. She looked from Gina back to me before giving me a disgusted look and leaving the garage. I didn’t loosen my hold on Gina, even when she tried to push away.

“Stop. Don’t fight me, Gina. Not now.”

“Are you sure this is what you want? I get it if it’s not. You were going to marry her. It’s going to hurt if you leave no matter what, but if you’re going to her, do it now. While I have people still willing to help me get through it.”

“This isn’t the right place for this conversation, but you need to know it’s you for me. No one else. I will never willingly leave you, Gina. Not for Joilyn. Not for anyone for any reason.”

“You’ve never lied to me.”

I was finally able to let her go, but only to frame her face in my hands so I could

make this as clear to her as I could. “And I’m not gonna start now, baby. I’m sure not startin’ now.”

Gina nodded, her eyes glistening with tears. A fragile smile began to curve her lips. “I know.”

“Come on, Falcon.” Piston gripped my shoulder. “Let’s get the ladies home. You guys all need the rest. I know Gina will rest easier back home.”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have insisted she come. It was stupid.”

“Never stupid to want your girl, Falcon. I’m glad we were able to give you both a swift reunion.”

I hated to let Joilyn down, but this woman was where I belonged. Wherever she went, so did I.

The ride back to the Grim Road compound took thirty minutes instead of the twenty it had taken Rocket before. Yeah. There was a reason they called him Rocket. And it was thirty minutes confined in a cage. The big Ford was spacious and nice, but I needed my bike.

I leaned over to whisper in Gina’s ear. “After I make love to you for a couple days, I’m takin’ you on a ride. A long one. Just you and me.”

She smiled up at me. “I’d like that.” Then she blushed. “Kinda looking more forward to the first part, though.” Then she turned and buried her face against my arm in embarrassment.

I chuckled and kissed the top of her head. “Me too, baby. Me too.”

Knox took me and Gina to her house instead of stopping at the clubhouse. I gave him a nod of thanks before helping Gina out and into the house.

I wasn't sure what I expected to happen when I got her home, but having the woman throw herself at me the second the door was shut wasn't it. And, sweet Jesus, I was grateful! She wrapped her arms and legs around me in a tight embrace and fused her mouth to mine. The second she did, it was fucking over.

As Gina's lips eagerly met mine, I returned her passion with equal fervor. It was as if we both had been starving for this connection and couldn't get enough of each other's taste or touch. Our mouths moved in perfect sync, exploring and claiming. She was every bit as aggressive as I needed her to be. It was a side of her I hadn't seen before. It made my need for her all the worse, knowing how much she must want this.

My hands slid down her back to cup her ass, squeezing and kneading. She moaned into the kiss, pushing herself even tighter against me.

My tongue danced playfully with hers before delving deeper, exploring her mouth as my free hand tangled in her hair. The soft strands felt like silk between my fingers as I crushed them in my fist, holding on tightly, afraid she might slip away. I could feel the heat of her pussy through both our jeans as she moved herself up and down the rigid length of my cock.

Breaking the kiss reluctantly, I stared at Gina with what I knew had to be a ravenous, fevered gleam in my eyes. "God damn it," I whispered hoarsely, "I want you so fucking bad." She nodded and I was surprised to find that same feral desire reflected back in her eyes as she looked into mine.

"Yes. Please."

"You'll tell me if I hurt or scare you?" I have no idea where I found the presence of

mind to say the words, let alone how I'd act if she needed to pull back. The lust that'd hit me the second she'd jumped into my arms wasn't altogether unexpected, but it was fucking strong! Primal. This was me and Gina. Claiming each other.

I trailed kisses down her supple neck to her collarbone before moving lower still. Nipping at her soft skin lightly, I continuing to explore what I could reach with my lips and tongue while I let my hands roam underneath her shirt to stroke and squeeze one perfect tit.

Gina arched her neck, giving me all the access I wanted to her creamy skin. Until it simply wasn't enough.

"Need you naked," I bit out in a hoarse demand. "Fuck!"

Immediately, she wiggled until she peeled her shirt off and whipped it over her head. My fingers found the back clasp to her bra and unfastened it with a flick so she could pull the offending material away from her chest and let it flutter to the floor.

I set her back on her feet so I could take off my own shirt. She stood there, bare-breasted with hints of moonlight filtering over her body. She was small but curvy in all the right places. Just like I remembered. Only this time, she was all mine. Forever. No one was ever taking her away from me again. Not another brother. Not fucking Hammer. Not Joilyn. No one. Gina was mine and I would protect her with my life.

I had to stop myself from taking her to the floor and covering her body with my own. She deserved better than that. She deserved to be worshipped and loved until she couldn't remember her own name. And then, I'd do it all over again.

"Turn around," I commanded. She complied, turning her back to me and her hands against the wall so that my hot gaze could trace every ridge of her spine as she presented herself to me like the offering she truly was. God, she was fucking perfect!

Every curve, every dip and swell just screamed mine ! Mine alone.

I kissed and sucked on the soft skin of her neck and back, kissing and nipping down her spine. I slipped my hands underneath the waistband of her panties, sliding them down her thighs until they pooled on the floor at her feet.

I slid a finger to the inside of her thigh, moving my hand upward to her pussy and brushing against her slick folds. She gasped, arching into my touch with a needy moan. Fuck! She was already wet for me. My girl was so turned on, it nearly shattered me.

As I explored her folds further I pushed my fingers inside to feel how wet and ready she was for me. She clenched her pussy around each digit as if greedy for more. As if wanting my cock to fill her. Gina moaned loudly when I found her clit and began circling it gently with my thumb while continuing to stretch her pussy with my fingers, searching for that hidden spot inside her to send her soaring.

The second I found it, she screamed, her pussy clamping down on my fingers. Sweat erupted over her skin and her knees gave out. I caught her, wrapping an arm around her waist to hold her steady while she rode out the orgasmic wave to its conclusion.

The second her body relaxed, I stood turning her in my arms and picking her up so that she wrapped her legs around my waist and clung. I carried her to the bedroom and kicked the door shut on my way inside.

“Fuck,” I growled against her neck as she wrapped her arms around me as tightly as her legs were. She latched on to my ear and little whimpers escaped as she licked and nuzzled me. “So fuckin’ hot. So fuckin’ sweet.”

“Please, Falcon,” she whimpered. “Oh, God, please!”

“You need me, baby?”

“I do.” She clung to me, even when I laid her down. Her arms tightened around my neck and she found my lips with hers again.

“I gotta get my fuckin’ pants off.” I reached between us to unfasten my fly and free my cock.

Gina let go of my neck to shove her hands between us, knocking into mine in her haste. She finally settled on shoving my jeans and briefs over my hips under my ass. She’d spread her legs wide, welcoming me when the head of my dick kissed her entrance.

Gina gasped and shuddered as my cock finally penetrated her tight, wet folds. She cried out, wincing as if in pain, but her nails dug into my ass and pulled me forward, welcoming me inside her body.

“Tell me you want to be mine,” I whispered harshly as I fisted my hand in her hair, forcing her gaze up to mine. “Tell me you want this.”

“I do! I need it so bad!”

“My cock? Or my ownership?”

Bless her, she didn’t hesitate. “Both! I need both, Falcon!”

Nothing could compete with the primal need that pulsed through my body. I let out a low groan as I slowly filled her up, making sure to go slow despite the burning desire to take her right now. I kissed her deeply, savoring the reunion and our first time together since her dark days.

“Falcon,” she gasped, looking up at me in wonder. “It’s you.” She cupped my face in her hands. There was a feverish gleam in her eyes as if she were riding a high. “It’s always been... you.” Her body relaxed and a dreamy smile spread her lips. “From the very first time we made love... It’s always been you.”

Her stark revelation filled me with something I had no hope of reining in. Pride? Possession? Protectiveness? All of it maybe. It also brought back the first time I ever saw her. I’d taken Hammer up on his offer to fuck his woman, not because I was into that kind of kinky shit, but because I wanted Gina like I’d never wanted another woman. I’d spent the entire night, not fucking her, but making love to her. I’d brought her as much pleasure as I could as often as I could. Leaving her that morning had hurt me worse than anything ever had. It had also brought back memories of leaving Joilyn. I hadn’t acknowledged it then, but now I could admit I hadn’t felt near the sense of loss when I’d left Joilyn as I did leaving Gina. Not that I didn’t love Joilyn, I did. Just not to this degree. And if there had been any doubt up to this point if I made the right decision to stay with Gina or honor a promise I made to Joilyn before she let me think she’d died, it was erased the second I was seated fully inside her, looking down into those glittering copper-colored eyes of hers. Gina was my one. My only.

Her walls clenched around me, trying to keep me inside her as I began to move. Her hips rocked against me, meeting each thrust with one of her own. It felt so right, so natural. She wrapped her legs around me tighter, pulling me closer, deeper inside her, as she arched into every stroke. I roamed my hands over her body, tracing every inch of skin I could reach as I pumped into her. Her own fingers tangled in my hair and held on tightly as I kissed her, licking inside her mouth, eager for more of her delicious taste.

“I love you,” she whimpered between kisses and cries. “I need you to know how much I love you. How m-much you m-mean to me.” Her voice caught on her words as I continued to ride her tender body, needing to brand her with my seed like I

needed to breathe.

As we moved together, the sweat dripped from my face and landed in the hollow of her throat. I watched in fascination as her eyes were closed as she cried out in bliss.

The smell of sex and desire filled the small room as we climaxed together. Gina jerked in my arms and my hips snapped against hers as I fucked her through our orgasms. Then I collapsed on top of her, my cock still embedded deeply inside her.

Gina

I awoke with a heavy weight over my torso. It took me a moment to feel my way through the murk of sleep, but the masculine grunt at my back pulled me the rest of the way from sleep.

It was still full dark outside and the only light filtered through the blinds from the full moon outside. I turned my head slowly, looking over my shoulder. When I did, the arm tightened around me and another grunt sounded.

I smiled. Falcon was going to be a handful. I had the feeling he'd take over my life if I let him. And, honestly, I didn't care if he did as long as he was with me.

His cock stirred where it nestled between my ass cheeks, pulsing as it grew. Probably the beginning of morning wood, but I still giggled. Raising my leg, I reached between us and guided his cock to my entrance. He thrust and groaned while I sighed in happiness.

"Good mornin' to you too, darlin'," he rasped at my ear.

"I forgot where I was," I said, giving him a soft smile. "But I wasn't afraid. I knew you'd always be there."

"God, baby. What the fuck you do to me..." His cock throbbed inside me going from what I thought was probably pleasantly aroused to pulsing with need the second the words were out of my mouth.

Falcon thrust his hips, fucking me with long, sure strokes.

Gripping the sheets, I arched my back and moaned softly at the feeling of his hard length pushing inside my entrance only to retreat and start over again. My pussy was still tender from the previous night's passion but I craved more. More pleasure. More of him. More... everything !

As he began to move, I couldn't help but match his rhythm, our bodies sliding together in perfect harmony. His breathing grew heavier as he increased the pace, his hands gripping my hips tightly. I loved how forceful he was with me, yet always conscious of his considerable strength. And Falcon was most definitely strong. Roped with muscle from top to bottom, he was powerful, knowing how to use the muscle he possessed. I'd always thought his body a work of art, more so because he could be gentle with his instead of always deadly.

The friction between us sent sparks of pleasure coursing through my body, making me gasp for air. He kissed my neck softly, his stubble scratching against my sensitive skin, sending shivers down my spine. The scent of our sweat mixed with sex only intensified my arousal.

My fingers curled into the sheets as he pressed me deeper into the mattress beneath us. My cries and Falcon's grunts echoed off the walls, filling the room with erotic sounds that made it harder for me to think straight.

"Fuck," Falcon groaned, "I could do this all fuckin' day."

His words sent a wave of heat straight to my clit. "Yes," I breathed out between pants. "Let's do that."

He leaned down and captured my lips in a fierce kiss that left me breathless. His tongue danced with mine, exploring every inch he could reach and giving me another

devastating kiss.

“Come with me, Gina,” he bit out. “Fuckin’ come now!”

I screamed as Falcon shuddered above me, giving a helpless grunt. Hot seed poured into me and I pushed back against him, trying to get him to go deeper inside me so his cum could never leave my body.

When the storm ebbed and my energy was spent, I let my body go limp in his arms. Falcon rolled off me and, with a brief kiss to my forehead, went to the bathroom. I assumed to clean up and wondered if I should follow him.

I’d just started to sit up when he came back to the bedroom with a wet cloth. “Lie back, baby. Let me wash you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. I want to.”

Watching him closely, I parted my legs. He lowered the cloth to my pussy and gently washed my swollen flesh and the insides of my thighs. Then he leaned down and kissed my mound gently. I sucked in a breath as he rose and winked at me.

“Wicked man,” I muttered.

“Heard that,” he called back.

I couldn’t help but giggle. This was the Falcon I knew and wanted. He was intense but playful and so very protective. I’d known he was the real deal the first time I met him. Every time after that he came to me, he only reinforced my belief that he was a very, very good man. I wanted that man for my own.

“I love you, Falcon.” I looked up at him to meet his gaze. I needed him to know I meant what I said. I wasn’t just saying this because I thought it was what he wanted to hear or to make him feel obligated to stay with me. It was the honest truth. “I want you to be happy. Whatever you choose. That’s all I want for you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And what about you? Don’t you deserve to be happy?”

“Well, yeah. But not at the expense of a good man like you. I won’t lie. It’ll hurt like hell. But you deserve a chance at the life that got taken from you. If that’s what you want.”

“Well, lucky for me, that’s not what I want.” He leaned down and kissed me again. Lightly, but no less passionately. “You’re stuck with me, honey. And I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

He settled into bed with me again. I lay cuddled against his chest, swirling my fingers through the sparse hair beneath them. “What happened, Falcon? With Joilyn. Before and... on the way home. I know you had to have talked to her.”

Falcon sighed and kissed me again. It seemed like a compulsion with him, like he had things to say, but got sidetracked. I couldn’t deny I loved it. Even if he was trying to distract me.

“Baby, are you sure you want to talk about this? I’m here with you. I’m not going anywhere, not even for her. I don’t want you to be upset because there’s no reason for it.”

“She wants you back, doesn’t she?”

“It doesn’t matter what she wants, baby. She chose her path, still walks the same fuckin’ path that led us here. What matters now is what I want. And I want you .”

I blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. “And you’re really, really sure about that?”

Falcon propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at me with those intense eyes that always seemed to peer right into my soul. “Gina, honey, I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

His declaration warmed me, chasing away the ghosts of doubt that lingered in the corners of my mind. With a deep breath, I let go of the last tendrils of insecurity and smiled up at him. “Then I’m all in, Falcon. No looking back.”

He grinned that lopsided smile that had first drawn me to him. “That’s my girl.” He kissed me once more before settling back on his pillow, me firmly against his chest, and tugged the covers closer around us. “Get some rest, baby. I have a feeling tomorrow’s gonna be a long day.”

Falcon

“Look, man. Believe me or not. But I’m telling you, Joilyn is working with the CIA to get inside Grim Road.” We were outside the Salvation’s Bane MC compound in a yard where they had parties with other clubs, or friends and family. Whatever the occasion. Rattler braced himself with his palms flat on the surface of a nearby picnic table and hung his head. I knew the feeling. While I didn’t want to marry Joilyn anymore, that didn’t mean I didn’t still care about her. This whole other side to Joilyn was throwing me, but I thought there were still glimpses of the young woman I’d known and had thought I’d wanted to spend my life with.

“Did she admit to that?”

“She didn’t have to, Rattler. She didn’t even try to deny it. She wants the three of us to be a team. She doesn’t understand they’re manipulating her to get to us.”

“Or maybe she knows and doesn’t care.” Rattler shook his head. “You know how that place is. They get you isolated from everyone and everything you’ve ever known, then make you rely on them. On your handler. Whoever they tell you to trust. Deep down, you know something’s wrong, but you can’t place it. Before you know it, you’re a lifer. You’re in that middle place where you’re a true believer. Just far enough up the food chain to have some authority but not far enough to realize everything they do has three or four different agendas, each one acting like a cascade until the end is reached.”

“Yeah,” I said, throwing the toothpick I was chewing on to the ground. “And the end result is never anything you’d have agreed to if you’d known what was happening.”

“Christ, what’s she gotten herself into?”

I tilted my head to the side just as a man walked out of the clubhouse. Finally, a place to focus my anger. I lifted my chin in the man’s direction. “Ask Scout.”

Yeah. That might have been the exact wrong thing to say. Rattler pushed off from the table and stormed off toward Scout. The other man gave him a wary look that morphed into resignation. Then Rattler swung a haymaker at Scout’s face, connecting with a crunch .

Scout grunted and blood spurted from his nose. I tensed, not sure if I would have to pull Rattler off Scout or help Rattler beat Scout to a bloody pulp. Could go either way.

“You son of a bitch!” Rattler bit out, getting up in the other man’s face. “If I find out you had anything to do with this, I swear I’ll fuckin’ gut you!”

“It’s exactly as I told you. When I figured out who she was and what they had her doing, I did my best to intervene. But they already had her part way in and I didn’t even talk to her until a couple weeks before she was fully embedded. That was all the time I had and she didn’t trust me yet. She wasn’t gonna take my word over the people she’d been training with for a year.” Scout brushed at the blood dripping steadily from his nose with the back of his arm. “All I could do was keep her as safe as possible on this end, wait for things to happen, and minimize the damage.”

“You coulda pulled her out.”

“You think I didn’t try?” Scout spat blood and brushed at his nose again. The blood still leaked in a steady drip, but was slowing. “I tried to get them to stop the raid when she called it in. Children in the compound we hadn’t planned on being there should have been enough to at least delay the start.”

“Why didn’t they?”

“Because whatever their ultimate goal, they deemed it more important. And no, I don’t know what the goal is, but staging this scale of an exercise tells me it’s not something I want to even contemplate where anyone can hear me.”

“And when everyone realized the place was on alert?”

“Again, I tried. I went so far as to disobey direct orders and got myself physically restrained. Then, after, Joilyn went dark. I got reassigned. Only, I kept an eye on the compound and established Joilyn was still there.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone? That she was alive?” I could tell Rattler was still pissed and I wasn’t sure if Scout’s explanation was helping or hurting.

“No. I had no idea what they’d do, but I knew they wouldn’t want to take a chance she’d blow the whistle on a covert CIA operation in fucking Oklahoma.”

“So you just waited. Hoping she’d contact you.”

“No, Rattler. I didn’t just wait. I contacted her. I let her know I wasn’t working through official CIA channels and that our connection was secure if she decided to trust me. It was weeks before she even acknowledged the message. When she did, she only said, ‘Acknowledged.’ All I could do was wait.”

“Christ.” Rattler scrubbed a hand over his face. I knew the feeling.

“This is way the fuck above my paygrade.” I pointed at Scout. “And fuck you anyway. You’re good in a fight, Scout. Why you workin’ for the spooks?”

“I have my reasons. But mostly it’s to find the agents they left behind. Those men and

women belong at Grim Road, Falcon. Joilyn does too.”

“Not until I can be certain she’s on the up and up.” I shook my head. “Who’s to say one of those cascading agendas didn’t include you bringing her here? You may not even know it.”

“Fuck!” Scout gave a rare display of temper. I’d only met the guy a couple of times, but I knew him by reputation. Word was he was always cool under fire, so for him to have this explosion of temper, no matter how mild, told me he hadn’t thought of this. “Have I been leading them straight to former agents trying to hide?”

“We need to talk to Thorn here at Bane and Rocket at Grim.” I pulled Rattler farther away from Scout, using the distraction to diffuse the situation as much as I could. “Joilyn has to have someplace to go until she figures out what she wants. It can’t be Grim and I don’t think Thorn’ll want her here.”

“I can find my own place to stay.” The three of us turned to see Joilyn standing next to a palm tree in the yard. She was smoking a cigarette like she hadn’t a care in the world.

“Joilyn, we’ll figure it out.” Rattler stepped toward her, but she flipped her cigarette aside and turned to leave. “Joilyn!”

“I don’t need your help, Ruben,” she called over her shoulder. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Stop, Joilyn.” Rattler followed his sister. “Just come back and let’s talk.”

“Nothing to talk about. I have my life and you guys have yours.”

“There’s no reason we can’t all still be a family. I can help protect you, but you’ve

gotta give me something.”

“I don’t have to give you anything, Ruben.” Joilyn’s voice was cold. Not at all like the woman I used to know. For the first time since she’d come back from the dead, I could see the real woman. The woman she’d become. “I had a job to do and I did it. Getting inside Grim Road was a pipe dream, but I was game to try.” She threw us a grin over her shoulder. “So long, guys.”

“Come on, Joi,” Rattler yelled. “Come home. We’ll figure it out.”

“I am going home, Ruben.” She glanced at me and I caught a glimpse of the woman I’d left behind when I went into the Marines. Then her expression morphed into one of complete indifference.

She took off at a jog away from the clubhouse and through the gate. No one stopped her leaving. Rattler looked torn, but also resigned.

“I can’t just let my sister walk away, Falcon.”

“You can’t keep her if she don’t want to stay, man.”

“Christ,” Rattler swore and took off after Joilyn.

She was safe. At least, as long as the agency didn’t decide she was a loose end they needed to tie up. I pulled out my phone and shot off a text to Rattler. I’d support him with whatever he needed, but I couldn’t follow Joilyn. She wasn’t my problem and I had my own woman to worry about.

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Gina

I saw Falcon and Rattler in the yard talking with Scout. Joilyn marched off and headed toward the gate. Rattler took off after her and I wanted to see what Falcon would do. I braced myself for him to join Rattler. If he did, I really thought my heart would break.

I took a breath and my heart pounded. Falcon turned to come back inside the clubhouse. He moved with purpose, his strides long and sure. The second he spotted me he hurried straight to me. I opened my arms and he wrapped his around me, crushing me to him.

“Honey, what are you doing out here? I thought you were asleep?”

“I missed you.”

He urged my legs around his waist as he made his way through the clubhouse back to our room. The second the door was closed, he kissed me. It was frenzied at first and I thought I was in for a wild ride, but he gradually slowed things down. He laid me on the bed and covered my body with his, but simply settled between my legs before staring down at me and stroking my hair gently.

“I’m sorry, baby. This hasn’t been easy on you. I’m sorry I’ve not been real... sharing. You know. With my feelings and shit.”

I had to fight a grin as I blinked up at him. “Feelings and shit. You have feelings?”

“Brat,” he grumbled, but grinned and leaned down to kiss me again. “I have feelings.”

“Oh yeah? What kind?” I was probably setting myself up for heartache, but I couldn’t help but push him a little.

“You know. The kind where I can’t bear to let you out of my sight.”

“So, you’ve got an obsession. You gonna stalk me?”

“If you try to leave me, sure. I’ll stalk you until I find you out by yourself, then I’ll drag you back to Grim Road and tie you to my bed.” The arrogant lift to his eyebrow said he fully believed he could accomplish that, but I could also see a bit of humor in his features.

“Tie me to your bed?” I raised an eyebrow at him but smiled just the same. “Is that supposed to make me feel threatened?”

“It’s supposed to make you feel wanted. Desired.” He kissed me gently, then whispered against my lips. “Loved.”

I pushed him back slightly so I could look into his eyes. “What? What did you say, Falcon?”

He grinned at me. “Is it so hard to believe I love you, Gina?”

“You... you love me?” I sucked in breath after breath, hardly able to believe what he’d said.

“I do, baby. I love you so fuckin’ much.”

“Oh, Falcon! I love you too! I love you too!”

The kisses that followed built a lust so hot I thought it would combust. The man was great with his tongue. In several different ways.

Somehow, he managed to get both of us undressed. It was kind of a blur because I couldn't get past kissing him. I loved the way he tasted. And how the Christ he managed to drive me so high so quickly with nothing but his kiss was not something I wanted to look too deeply into. Mainly because why should I care? It felt fucking good and I loved Falcon with all my heart.

I was about to come when Falcon entered me with a swift, hard thrust. The world blurred and I could only focus where our bodies joined, and my orgasm threatened to overwhelm me. I lost myself in the intensity coursing through every nerve ending. Falcon's movements were precise, designed to evoke a whirlwind of sensations that bordered on overwhelming. He knew exactly how to make me forget everything but the here and now.

"Falcon," I gasped between breaths, clinging to him as if he were my lifeline. He slowed then, almost stopping, pulling back to look into my eyes.

"What is it, baby?" Falcon's voice was thick with emotion, his eyes searching mine for any sign of hesitation.

"Just... don't stop," I managed to whisper, feeling an unexplainable fear of losing this connection we'd found. I shouldn't have worried, though. Hadn't Falcon proven time and time again how much he cared about me? Maybe I hadn't seen it at first, but even when he'd had to confront his past, he had never wavered in his commitment to me. I could see that now. Sure, finding out Joilyn was still alive had thrown him, but wouldn't it anybody? He'd never made me feel like he regretted being with me. He'd only ever made me feel loved. Cared for. Like I mattered.

With a sharp cry, I came, sweat erupting over my body as I clung to Falcon.

“I’ve got you, baby. I’ve got you.” His voice was hoarse, and he trembled just as much as I did. His cock pulsed hard inside me and I realized he’d come with me.

We clung together for a long while. Falcon collapsed on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. I loved his weight. I loved how much bigger he was than me. I just loved Falcon.

I wanted to drift off into a sated sleep, but I had questions I needed answered.

“Falcon?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“What happens next?”

He shifted, turning his face into my neck and sucking gently on the skin he found there. “We sleep for a while. Make love again before going back to sleep. Then, tomorrow, we go home. Then hopefully repeat the making love part. Several times.”

“Falcon...”

He chuckled. “I’m only partially kidding. The truth is, I’m not really sure. For us, we’re going home. I mean, assuming you want to come back home with me to Grim Road. Right?”

“Where else would I go? I want to be wherever you are. But what about Joilyn? She needs a place to stay. I heard part of what you guys were talking about in the yard. You don’t know if you can trust Joilyn. But what happens if the people she works for didn’t want her to survive? Won’t she be in danger?”

Falcon let out a slow breath. He took his time answering. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was choosing his words or if he wasn’t sure how to answer. “I don’t

know. Honestly, though? Yeah. I think she's in danger. Maybe not right away, but at some point she'll start to think for herself. When she does, she's going to be more trouble than she's worth to them."

"So, you're saying she might dodge a bullet now, but more will follow."

"Yeah." We lay in silence for a while, and I had very nearly dozed off this time. "I feel sorry for Joilyn, Gina. Not like I pity her or anything. I'm angry she let them talk her into joining the CIA, and I'm angry she either didn't think through all the ways their arrangement could go wrong or did and still went along with them. I feel bad for her, but she created this situation herself. The second they said anything about faking her death, she should have run in the other direction."

"Sounds like maybe she should have run long before that."

"She wanted to serve her country like me and Rattler. I can respect that, even if I wouldn't have wanted that life for her. I can't be sorry she chose to serve her country. I know how the agency works. They're experts at recruiting the right people for the right job. They obviously saw something in Joilyn they knew they could use. And they were right." He nuzzled my cheek and neck, the coarse hair of his beard tickling slightly. "Joilyn wants to be where she is, I think. Sure, she misses me and Rattler, but she's all about the job. Whether she'll grow to understand the politics and intrigues of the agency is something we'll just have to wait and see."

"What are you going to do?"

"Now, that's an easy question, baby. I'm gonna take you home and do all that stuff I mentioned before. Hopefully all day every day for a long time."

I smiled. "You know what? That sounds just about perfect."