



Gunnar (Kiss of Death MC 1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Pippa -- My life has been shaped by some kind of underworld scheming I don't really understand. Or maybe I don't want to know. But now I'm living in darkness and violence, unable to break free but unwilling to succumb to the drug induced stupor my captives force on me. Then Gunnar, a fierce man with a dark relentlessness, charges to my rescue like a black knight, taking vengeance on those who have hurt me. Our first meeting isn't a rescue out of a fairy tale -- it's pure chaos. Gunnar may be an ex-con, but he protects me with a ferocity I never knew existed.

Gunnar -- Pippa's quiet resilience clashes with the violent life I know. With just a look, the woman claims my heart and life takes on a brand new meaning. I've done time -- fifteen long years behind bars, to protect my sister. Now I'll protect Pippa with a ruthlessness she can't even imagine.

My past is dark, my future uncertain, and every moment with Pippa makes me realize the lengths I'll go to keep her. Fate has brought me to the one woman I know I can't live without.

WARNING: Gunnar includes scenes of graphic violence and adult situations including potential triggers for some readers. There's also a protective hero, an intelligent, insightful heroine, and eventual happy ending. No cheating, as always.

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Fifteen years ago...

“No, Gunnar. You can’t do this.”

“It’s done, Hannah. Go home before anyone sees you here.” I tried to keep my voice soft, but there was an almost overpowering rage inside me threatening to explode. My sister, my twin, should never have to be exposed to something like this.

Hannah sobbed and threw herself at me. “Please don’t do this, Gunnar. Please. I can’t not have you with me.”

“I’m so sorry, Hannah. And no matter what, I’ll always be with you. Go home and clean up. Don’t say anything to Mom or Dad.”

“I can’t do that. Dad has to know.”

“NO!” I snapped the command hard at her. “This can’t come back on you.” I pushed her back slightly but framed her face with my hands. “Go clean up. Burn your clothes.”

“He was going to r-rape me, Gunnar.” Her voice was so soft I barely heard her. Had I not been looking straight at her I would have missed her words.

“I know. But he didn’t. Right?”

She shook her head. “No. I s-stopped h-him.”

“Good. That’s all that matters. Now go. Do as I say.” I tried my best to be gentle with her, but the fact was, this was really a shit show.

“Daddy told me he didn’t like him.” Now, Hannah turned to look at the man she’d stabbed to death ten minutes before. Thank God I’d been close when she’d called. Just like our father had taught us, Hannah’s blade had found his left kidney several times and he’d bled out. The result was a Godawful fucking mess. There was no way for me to clean it up without leaving evidence behind and the only way to ensure it was completely clean would mean getting Bones MC involved. Which I would never do. Not for this. Yeah, there was some sketchy shit going on from time to time in Bones, but Dad and Bohannon tried to keep it clean. This was anything but clean.

“I know. Don’t worry about that right now. Just go home and do what I told you. And not a word to anyone. Go home. Go to your room. Take a shower and scrub all the blood off. Don’t forget to get under your nails. Use peroxide on your hands. It will bubble if it touches even dried blood, so you don’t miss anything.” She held my gaze with her fearful, pain-filled one. “Burn all your clothes, Hannah. Take them to the woods deep inside the compound, away from everyone. Everything. Including your underwear and socks. Be careful, but use gas or lighter fluid. You have to get it all and sift through the ashes to make sure everything is burnt. Understand me?”

She nodded before hugging me once more. “I’m so sorry, Gunnar. So sorry...”

“None of this is your fault. He crossed a line and was asking to get killed. Just take care of yourself. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I watched her go. At sixteen, she should never have had to go through this. Now it was up to me to protect her, and I would. With everything in me. I’d give up everything to protect my twin. Even if I called my older brothers, I wasn’t sure they could fix this. Not without risking the club and I’d never put my dad in that situation. Every single member of that club was like family to me. I’d known them all my life.

So, the only way to protect Hannah without risking any more of my family was to do this myself.

I gave Hannah a few minutes to get on her way. I spent that time getting my hands bloody. I had no intention of them doing a thorough job investigating this crime scene, but I wiped down the blade Hanna had used before covering it back in blood and making sure my own prints were on the knife.

By the time I'd prepared for my next call, I'd had time to think about what I was doing and consider the consequences. No matter which way I looked at it, the only path I could see to keep my sister, brothers, my father, as well as Bones MC and my father's company, ExFil, away from risk was to take responsibility myself. My decision would probably cost me my relationship with my father and the club I'd grown up in, but Dad could take care of himself as well as mom and my sister.

The legal battle that followed was short and painful. Short because I pled guilty from the first and would not let anyone convince me to do anything different. I never wavered from my story that I'd killed the bastard, but I'd told them it was because he'd threatened my sister. I think even the judge was baffled by my refusal to allow my lawyer to negotiate for a lesser charge. Or go to a fucking trial!

Dad was pissed as shit. I think he knew something was up, but I wasn't saying anything and, just like I'd instructed her, Hannah didn't either. When she'd visited me and could get me away from Mom and Dad, she'd plead with me over and over to change my mind. To let her tell Dad what happened and have him sort out the whole mess. I'd refused and she'd respected my wishes, but I knew what her decision cost her. She felt doubly guilty. Hannah would never survive incarceration of any kind. She was too gentle and empathetic. The juvie population alone would eat her alive. I couldn't even contemplate her in an adult female prison.

My mother said Hannah cried a lot for no apparent reason. She asked me if I thought

she loved that bastard enough to mourn. I told her I had no idea. I let them think Hannah was mad at me and she likely was. Just not for killing her boyfriend. She was angry because I was going away to prison, running headlong like I was looking forward to it. The reality was, I was fucking terrified.

“Son, I can’t help if you don’t tell me what’s goin’ on.”

“What’s goin’ on is I killed a man who threatened my sister. I did the crime. I’ll do the time.” I didn’t mean to be belligerent, but it was either that or break down and give it all to him straight. Along with a lot of tears and snot. I knew what the consequences of this were. My childhood ended today.

Deep down, I knew I needed to tell Dad. He could take care of all this. You know. If I’d told him to begin with. Looking back, keeping him out of this might not have been the best decision of my life. Oh well. Done was done. I’d do this for my sister because she deserved to be happy and to not be punished for killing the son of a bitch trying to rape her. I absolutely would not take a chance on some overzealous prosecutor painting her as the victim. She’d been through enough. I’d do this, because I wanted to be the man Dad raised me to be.

As someone once said, if you pray for the rain, you have to deal with the mud too.

“They’re talking about sentencing you as an adult which means twenty years , Gunnar. More if they decide to sentence you on murder instead of manslaughter. You didn’t even negotiate what you were fucking confessing to!” Dad stood abruptly and paced across the room before returning. In what was probably a fit of frustration and anger, he smacked the chair over so it skidded across the narrow strip of floor between the table and the wall. “Christ! Have you even thought about what that means? You’ll get to do your first couple in the juvie camp, but the day you turn eighteen, they’ll put you in with the big boys.”

“Yeah, Dad. I thought about it. I went over everything with my lawyer.”

“Did he also tell you this prosecutor is going for the maximum sentence? You killed an unarmed man with a knife. You did it in private so it looks like premeditation, and no one can dispute your account of the story.”

“I know.” I was starting to feel like a kid. My dad was a bit overprotective, even with us boys. Though I was only sixteen, my dad had raised all his kids to be men and women. I’d come this far so it was time to man up.

After this, I’d never make my father proud, but maybe he wouldn’t be ashamed of me.

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Gunnar -- Present Day

“This the day?”

I glanced at my cellmate, now a close friend. I was packing up my personals in our cell, getting ready to leave prison after serving fifteen years of a twenty-year sentence. “Yep.”

“Thought you had a few more years left.”

I shrugged. “I did.”

“Interesting.” Knuckles leaned against the end of the bunk. I paused in my packing to find him watching me intently.

“Yeah,” I drawled slowly. “Thought so myself.”

“You think it was your old man?” Knuckles knew about Cain and ExFil and Bones. He knew my dad had some pull and was likely thinking I’d held out on him.

“If you’re implyin’ I’ve been down-playin’ people I know, I haven’t been. This is as much a surprise for me as it is you.”

“I know.”

OK, now I stopped what I was doing altogether and took a step toward Knuckles. “What’s goin’ on?” Clearly, I’d missed something important.

“You’re a solid guy, Gunnar. I had an... opportunity.”

“What kind of opportunity?” I was preparing myself for a fight, but I had no idea who’d I’d be fighting. Knuckles didn’t usually play politics inside, but one thing I’d learned while in USP Terre Haute was that there wasn’t much men wouldn’t do for a few amenities.

“The kind where I had to make a choice.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are we gettin’ ready to try to kill each other, Knuckles?”

“Depends on your answer.”

I held my arms out from my side slightly so he could see I wasn’t armed. “Gotta know the question first, man.”

“I was told there was a one-time opportunity for me to get myself or one person of my choosing out early. Call it a favor from someone in the position to make this happen.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“If you agree to do something for me, you get to go back to your life a couple years early.”

“I suppose it depends on what it is you want. There are things I won’t do. Even for my freedom. I take it me getting this early parole wasn’t my father’s doing.”

“Even for the man who kept you alive when you first got to the real prison outta Camp Hilton?”

There was nothing easy about the camp and the bastard knew it. He also knew I'd agree with him I was alive now because of him. "Yeah, Knuckles. Even for you. But I hope you know I'd never deny you something without a fuckin' good reason."

Knuckles studied me for several seconds before nodding his head slowly. "Yeah. I do know. It's why I went ahead and pushed the order through. You're a good man, Gunnar. Of all the people here, I believe you are the one man who has never been a danger to society. Anyone who fucks with your family isn't considered society and is asking for whatever you dish out." He snorted out a laugh. "You're leaving whether you agree to help me or not."

"What's the ask, Knuckles?"

"My daughter," he said. "She's been taken. One of my enemies found out who she was and used her to get revenge on me." Knuckles handed me a few photos of a young woman bound and gagged with an expression of abject terror on her face. The thing striking me most about her were her bright green eyes. They shimmered with tears, but there was something about them. A quiet acceptance of what was about to happen, maybe? Not in the sense that she'd given up, but like she'd accepted the experience wasn't going to be pleasant, and was determined to make it through so the task was complete.

"Pippa?" Knuckles had told me of her often enough. He was so proud of his baby girl. He'd managed a fling with one of the nurses in the prison before I got here and the woman had kept in touch over the years, even going so far as to let the girl meet Knuckles. The visit had gone well, but Knuckles had come back to the cell angry and agitated, afraid his enemies might use her to get revenge. That had been about five years ago. I knew there was nothing in the Goddamned world Knuckles wouldn't do for Pippa, whether it be killing or dying for her.

"Yeah. I've had some stuff sent to the Bones MC clubhouse for you. I can't rescue

Pippa on my own and I have no idea if my own club would back me after what happened. The fallout of killin' those bastards put Kiss of Death in a pretty bad position."

OK, the name of his club got my attention. "Kiss of Death? Motorcycle Club in Nashville?"

Knuckles nodded. "You know of us, then?"

"Yeah. You could say that." I had to be careful here. I had no idea how I had managed to form a strong friendship with this man over the course of fifteen years and not realized he'd had ties to Kiss of Death.

"I was vice president before I got put in here. After I went away, things went to shit. Ain't even sure at this point if they'll still accept my patch. Damned sure ain't vice president anymore. So my chances of gettin' her back on my own are pretty Goddamned slim."

"You think I have a better shot?"

"Know you do. The new prez of Kiss of Death came from Bones. Vice president too. I can tell by the look on your face you know this."

"Yeah. What I don't know is why you kept your ties to them a secret from me."

"There's a reason I hadn't called in that favor before now, Gunnar. I set this in motion the day I found out Torpedo had taken over Kiss of Death. It took a few months for my guy to pull it off, so I used that time to gather as much information on the fuckers who took her."

"I assume the information is in the package you sent back to Bones?"

“Yeah. Let whoever you need see it. Do whatever you have to. But get Pippa away from those bastards.”

I didn't hesitate but stuck out my hand to Knuckles and he took it. “On my life, brother. I'll bring Pippa home.”

“No,” he snapped. “You take her back to Bones or Kiss of Death if Torpedo and Bohannon are men you trust. But get her behind locked doors and do not let her out of your sight. If that means you take her as your old lady, then you do it. That's the ask, Gunnar.”

It took a moment to comprehend what I'd just heard. “Me? You want me to make your daughter my old lady?”

“It's the only way she's safe, because you're not the kind of man to let anyone harm someone who belongs to him. You rescue her, charm her, then claim her. And you will treat her with fucking respect and coddle her like the fuckin' princess she is. Or, so help me and by God, I will bury you .”

“I'll give her my property patch, Knuckles. I'll protect her with my life, but that's as far as I can promise. If she don't want me, she don't want me.”

“Take it as a challenge, then. Make her want you.” Oh, the man was good...

“One thing I've always said is my dad taught me you didn't lie to people who meant something to you. So I'm not gonna lie to you. No matter how much you bully me. I will give her my property patch so she has my protection, but I'm not promisin' anything beyond that.”

To my surprise, Knuckles grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “This is why you're the only man I trust with my baby girl. You don't cave under pressure when

it's somethin' you believe in."

"My dad taught me you can't trust a man who doesn't respect his old lady. That means you don't cheat on her. Any man who does can't be trusted. I won't make her my old lady until I know it's what we both want. Even patchin' her is splittin' hairs, but I'll go that far to give her all the protection I can and defend her with my life."

"Your dad sounds like a smart man. I wish I could have met him."

"Neither of you are dead. It could happen someday."

Knuckles snorted. "Not on your life, kid. Ain't meetin' a man like Joe "Cain" Gill wearin' what amounts to chains."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Name it, kid."

"Why'd you kill those three guys?"

Instead of answering right away, Knuckles indicated for me to take a seat on the lower bunk, which was his. He pulled up a box with tattoo supplies. Once he'd taken out what he needed, he indicated I should put my right hand on top. He spread my thumb and forefinger apart and started working. The image was small and incomplete, looking like a Celtic knot with half of it missing. The ink extended from where the webbing at the corner of my thumb folded in when my fingers weren't parted to the very edge of the webbing. Where the center of the knot would be if the image were complete was an what looked like an upside-down V with one side straight while the other was at an angle.

He wiped down the image and put some goop on the fresh ink, then extended his

hand to me, wanting me to take it in a handshake. When I did he gripped hard. “Look at it.” I did. Where our hands locked, the knot was completed. In the center of it was a capital K. Mine completed the bottom part, his the top. The tattoos were basically identical, but his half of the K had a crown where mine didn’t. “Anyone loyal to me will have the same tattoo. Mine has a crown because I’m in charge.”

“I’m loyal to you, Knuckles. You know that. But I’m also loyal to my family and I have no intention of ever coming back to prison once I’m out. I’m not doing illegal shit for you or anyone else unless there’s a fuckin’ good reason.” I held my ground, grasping Knuckles’s hand as hard as he did mine. “I’ll do anything necessary to get your daughter out safe, includin’ killin’ a bunch of motherfuckers if they need it. But that’s as far as I go. I won’t deliberately go against you unless I feel it’s morally wrong.”

Knuckles was silent for a long time, holding my gaze. When he spoke, he gripped my hand even tighter. Given the way his eyes seemed to bore into my soul, he was probably looking for any sign of a reaction to whatever he was getting ready to say or do. “They raped and murdered my sister.” There was a slight flinch to the muscle under his eye when he spoke. Like the mere memory affected him viscerally. “The men I killed. When I learned Pippa had been kidnapped, it felt like fate intended for you to go after her. You protected your sister despite the cost to you. Not many men would commit to something that hard. So, if you tell me you’ll get my daughter back, I’m puttin’ my faith in the boy who chose to be a man to protect someone he loves. I’m hopin’ you’ve still got that determined kid inside you somewhere.”

“On my life, Knuckles. I’ll get her back and keep her safe. If I die, one thing I know with absolute certainty is that Cain would never let an innocent suffer once he knew of it. Torpedo was his second long before I was born so I’ve known him my whole life, too. I know them all. Once I get them on this, as long as one of them is still alive, they will never stop trying to bring Pippa home.” It was as big a promise as I could make, but I knew my dad and his club. Even in fifteen years, they might not accept

me back into the fold, but their integrity would never break.

“Then get your ass outta here. You tell me when she’s safe.”

“I’ll give you regular reports. We’ll have to research and plan, but I won’t take any more time than strictly necessary before going to bring her out.”

“Plan it well, brother. Get her out safe.”

“You have my word.”

* * *

Pippa

They were coming. I could hear heavy footfalls and raised male voices. It was part of the torture I’d endured for the last month. At least, I thought it had been a month. I’d scratched a notch into the wooden floor for each day I’d been there. Might have missed a day or counted one twice. It was hard to tell with the drugs and the fact that there was only one window and I wasn’t even sure if it faced the morning or evening sun. I never knew what my captors were going to do, but it was never pleasant. Usually, it meant someone was drugging me or a beating when I fought the drugging, but things had been escalating recently. I got the impression they were waiting on something. I wasn’t sure what, and the natives were getting restless, so to speak.

“Is Boss lettin’ us play with the bitch today?”

“Not yet.” The voices were distinctively different. While the first one had a squeak and a whiny tone, the second voice was deeper and more sinister. It was the man who came in to shoot me up every few hours. While I sometimes got a little dizzy, whatever they were using wasn’t as strong as I’d have expected. I was never

completely under and had, so far, been able to fight them off whenever they got handsy. Probably more because they obviously didn't have the go ahead to do whatever they wanted. As to who "they" were, I had no idea.

The door opened and I huddled into an even tighter ball on the floor in the corner. There was only a dingy mattress for me to sleep on and a bucket in the corner for me to go to the bathroom in, and that was it. Not a blanket or pillow or anything. I was naked, cold, and filthy, my hair a tangled, nasty mess. If I made it out of here, I was sure I'd have to cut it. Which was the least of my worries.

It was dark, and the light spilling into the room hit me squarely in the eyes. I whimpered and lifted a hand up to block out the light. Which was exactly what the man wanted. He snagged my arm and extended it so my elbow wasn't bent.

I struggled but he didn't smack me around this time. Probably because I was no match for his greater strength. Plus, they hadn't been feeding me regularly and it had been a couple days since I'd had any water. The fight was rapidly running out of me. Rather than waste energy on a futile effort, I did my best to conserve my strength. Unless he hit me with a lot more than he usually did, I would still have enough awareness of everything around me to be able to fight if this was a prelude to another assault. What these guys didn't know and what I'd taken great pains to hide from them, was I had never been overly susceptible to narcotics. Why? No clue. But other than taking away the pain, I didn't get high. Which, in this situation wasn't exactly a blessing.

There was a sharp prick in the bend of my elbow as the guy found a vein, even without a tourniquet. He pressed the plunger and the sharp burning sting left in its wake made me cry out. Every time they did this, I was certain my arm was going to turn black and fall off. A few seconds later, euphoria warmed me from the inside out. They'd definitely hit me with a stronger dose, but it still wasn't enough to put me out. I wasn't sure if being awake was a blessing or a curse, though.

The second he pulled the needle from my arm, the guy let me go and stomped out, just like always. The whiny-sounding guy lingered, but the other man snagged him by the upper arm and dragged him to the door. He slammed the door shut and I heard the click of the outside lock. Once again, I was alone.

My head was actually spinning, but the disorientation I'd thought might follow didn't happen. Everything was just... soft. God only knew how much the bastard had hit me with to get this effect. Good news was, my face didn't hurt where he'd hit me anymore.

It wasn't long before the door opened again. Just like I knew it would. They never waited long between injections before they came in with people to look at me. Men. Women. Mostly men, though. It wasn't hard to put together they were there to inspect goods. Which meant, I was being sold to the highest bidder. Or something.

"The side of her face is swollen." This guy sounded different than the others who'd come to look at me. Less refined. I thought I smelled gasoline. Kind of like when I'd been brought here. The dizziness combined with the bright light in my face made it impossible to see him clearly, but one thing was for sure. He was a big motherfucker if the unfamiliar blurry double shadow I was seeing was the guy speaking.

"Bitch shoulda laid still."

"Where else's she hurt?"

"Dunno, man. Don't fuckin' care either. Do you wanna make a bid on the bitch or not?"

There was a small pop . Nothing big, more like a snap firecracker. Then two more. I heard more voices, then hands grabbed at me, tugging at me. I screamed and kicked out as hard as I could, panic driving away the lingering effects of the drug I'd been

given.

“It’s all right. It’s all right. You’re safe, Pippa. I’m here to get you out.” The words did nothing to calm me down. Especially when something was shoved over my head.

“NO! NO! Bastard!” I fought. Hard. But I’d been starved and drugged, not to mention taking beatings any time I fought back. I didn’t have a chance against this guy. Then my head was free and my arms soon followed. That’s when I realized he’d put a shirt on me, covering my body in soft material.

“I know, honey. But I promise I’ll be better.” He sounded like he was only half paying attention to me even as he slipped my feet into some loose, soft pants.

“Be better?” I know it was a stupid conversation and probably not one we had time for, but the question slipped out before I could even think of censoring it.

“At not being a bastard.” He put socks on my feet before slipping shoes on.

“I’m, uh, not really sure I can walk. I haven’t been on my feet much since they brought me here.” I took in a shuddering breath as flashes of the early hours of my captivity flew through my mind. I heard myself whimper. “I’m not... I c-couldn’t even go to the b-bathroom...” My thought trailed off, and I shuddered again, barely biting back a sob of despair and humiliation.

“Didn’t figure you could walk out, and I don’t plan on you having to. I just believe in being prepared. Besides, the socks and shoes might help get your feet warm.” He continued to move around the tiny space with efficient movements. “I know you’re hurting and scared. But I’ll keep you safe. On my life.”

I looked up at him and knew I was going to cry. No tears came, but I could feel great sobs inside me wanting to break free. “I don’t think I’ll ever be warm or clean again.”

“Christ.” The man pulled me into his arms and held me for long moments before wrapping an arm around my waist to pick me up and carry me outside. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms and legs around him and hung on tight. “When I get you to safety, I may well kill Knuckles for this fuckin’ stunt.”

“Knuckles?”

“Yeah, honey.”

“Why would you kill him? Did he do this to me?” My heart started pounding again and I knew a panic attack was imminent. I pushed away but the man only held me tighter, wrapping his other arm around my back to hold me more securely as he continued walking. “My mom s-said h-he wasn’t a good m-man, but...”

“He is, honey. He’s the reason I’m here to get you. He sent me to get you because he knew you were in trouble.”

“Y-you had other th-things to do. I’m so s-sorry!” I sobbed out a cry, unable to stop myself.

“Stop it!” He snarled at me, and I flinched. He climbed into the back of a big Humvee with me still in his arms. Instead of sitting me beside him, he simply thumped on the seat in front of him with the side of his fist. “Move out.”

The vehicle jerked into motion and his arms tightened around me. “Just hold on, honey. I’ve got you now. You’re safe.” His words and tone were kind, but I doubted he wanted to be in the situation he found himself in. He held me with one arm while he fished around in a pack with the other hand. Moments later, he pulled out a bottle of water.

“I’m so sorry.” I sobbed against his shoulder where I’d buried my face. “I appreciate

you c-coming for me, but I'm s-sorry you h-had t-to."

"None of this is your fault, Pippa. Understand? None of it."

"But you're angry at Knuckles because he sent you after me."

"He did and I am angry, but not at him. Certainly not at you."

I breathed out another small sob. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for getting me out of there."

He grunted and opened the bottle of water before giving it to me. "Drink up." The man simply could not help but be in charge. In any other situation, I might have smiled. He tugged a thermal blanket from his pack and draped it around my body. Then his arms tightened around me and the blanket and he sighed, his chin resting on top of my head. "Just rest if you can. The girls'll get you something to eat and help you clean up when we get to the clubhouse. Then you can rest. I'll be watching over you the whole time. You're safe now, Pippa. I swear it."

I had no idea why I believed this man, but I did. I didn't even know his name, but he was being kind. Maybe it made me stupid to trust him so completely, but one second I felt my body relax into his embrace, the next... nothing.

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Gunnar

“She’s out.” I told the contact Knuckles had given for me to get a message to the other man.

“Condition?”

“Banged up and likely drugged, but she’s coherent. Passed out when we got underway.”

“I want a detailed list of her injuries.”

That got my attention, but I knew better than to ask now. The convo had to be short and to the point. “Copy that.” Then I disconnected the call.

The woman in my arms was nothing like what I’d expected. And I’d expected quite a lot. There was a palpable gentleness about her I’d never associated with Knuckles. Despite her nature, she fought when she had to. I got the feeling I was gonna lose my shit when I found out all she went through. Yet, despite her trauma, she could still fall asleep in my arms.

I was under no illusion that all the shit Knuckles spouted in prison about him wanting me to take care of his daughter was the only reason he chose me for this task. Knuckles wasn’t a complete monster, but he wasn’t above using whomever he had to, including family, to get what he wanted. Unfortunately for him, I was going to ignore his duplicity and keep his daughter, and there wasn’t a Goddamned thing he could do about it.

We rolled into the Bones MC compound an hour later. I'd already been here before heading to Pippa, but I'd come in secret. Scout and Goose, a couple of guys in Bones I'd known as a kid, had helped me get in and get the package Knuckles had sent for me. I'd left and pored over the information he'd sent in a hotel room for two days before calling Torpedo. Much as I wanted my brothers to help me, I wasn't ready to face them. Especially while bringing something like this to their door. Torpedo had sent two of his men and the Humvee to help me with this mission. Chains and Hawk had proven to be solid all the way around, offering their military insight to my brute force approach. I'd soaked up the knowledge, seeing it as a critical skill I was sorely lacking. I could learn. I'd just have to not be too proud to ask for help. In the end, we came up with a good entry and exit strategy that had worked perfectly.

Pippa hadn't moved but was breathing steadily and easily. One small hand curled into the material of my shirt, and I covered it with my own. This was the woman I was going to make my old lady. She didn't know me. I didn't know her. But somehow, I was going to make this happen.

The second we stopped in front of the clubhouse, my adopted brother, Ice, opened the door and held it for me. I stepped out with Pippa cradled against my chest, sound asleep. My other adopted brother, Cyclone, moved close to us and brushed a hank of dirty hair away from her eyes where it had fallen. "I've got Mama waitin' for you, Gunnar. She'll take care of your girl."

I nodded my thanks, then turned back to Ice. "What do you know about an MC called Fire and Steel?"

Ice frowned. "Bad lot, that bunch. Pretty sure the members Torpedo and Bohannon didn't kill in Kiss of Death migrated this way. Most of them moved on northward, but a few settled near Richmond. Outside our territory, but when you called with this" -- he indicated Pippa -- "we started digging. Data, Zora, and Suzie are still investigating, but there's no doubt they're trafficking."

“I confirmed that myself. I got in to get Pippa by posing as a buyer. Bastards ain’t real smart. They didn’t even make me put down a deposit or pay in full before seeing the merchandise.”

“Did you leave any of them alive?” Ice gave me a hard look, and I wasn’t really sure what the correct answer was.

I was my own man, especially after the time I’d spent in prison. But Ice was still my big brother. And Cain was still my father. Lying wasn’t even an option. “Not inside or in the immediate vicinity of the compound. Anyone left alive in that club wasn’t home.”

“Were you careful?” That came from Cyclone. Ice gave him a hard look too, but Cyclone didn’t back down.

I wasn’t going to lie, especially to myself. This hurt. Horribly. “You don’t want us here.” It was an accusation, pure and simple, without even a hint of a question. I’d told them the situation when I realized I’d have to get Pippa seen to before making the trek to Nashville. It hurt like a motherfucker knowing they didn’t care enough about me now to offer us their protection for more than a few hours, but I got it. Didn’t mean I liked the idea of my own brothers kicking me and my woman out to save the club. Of course, I hadn’t really claimed her as my woman in front of others. Also, Pippa needed to know the score, too. Once she was sober.

“Dawn and Willa are both pregnant again.” Cyclone was talking to Ice. Not me.

“And we don’t turn away defenseless women. Or family . What the fuck’s the matter with you?” I don’t think I’d ever seen Cliff or Daniel seriously argue. They were always on the same page. Obviously more than a few things had changed since those two took over as president and vice president.

“We didn’t even know you were out of prison until you called to tell us you were rolling in!” He turned back to his brother. “You can’t tell me you’re completely comfortable with this. We’ve got more than just us and our family to worry about, Cliff. We’ve got the whole fuckin’ club and all their families to worry about, too. If he’s brought trouble back with him and someone gets hurt...”

“Then you deal with it.” Mama appeared from the shadows and moved to me and Pippa. As she passed Ice, she smacked him in the back of the head none too gently. “You don’t abandon family, boy,” she snapped. “Your father taught you better than that.”

“The fuck, Mama!”

“The fuck indeed,” she muttered as she ran her hands over Pippa. “I can’t believe you’d even entertain the thought of turning your brother and his woman away.” She shone a light in Pippa’s eyes, pulling up her eyelid as she did.

Pippa cried out and turned her face into my chest, ducking her head. I held her tighter, which seemed to be what she needed. She settled, then turned her head and met Mama’s gaze.

“I’m sorry, child,” Mama soothed. “I’m a doctor. I only want to make sure you’re OK.” Mama smiled kindly at Pippa before looking up at me. “Bring her to my clinic, Gunnar.” She looked back at Cyclone. “You can stay here, young man. And if you think that just because I love you like a grandson I won’t make sure you’re stripped of your rank in this club, try pulling a stunt like this again.” She gave Cyclone a derisive sniff before turning and heading back to the clubhouse.

I didn’t look at my brothers. I wasn’t sure I could. Not right now. Instead, I followed Mama and carried Pippa inside, shifting her around so her front was to my chest as I held her close. This wasn’t the homecoming I’d envisioned.

“Lay her here.” Mama put the head up on the stretcher and put a pillow under Pippa’s knees for comfort as well as one behind her head when I did as Mama asked. Pippa whimpered and clung to me when I tried to back away from her. “Don’t worry, sweetheart.” Mama brushed her fingers over the bruise on Pippa’s cheek. “Your man’s not going anywhere without you.”

Pippa whimpered again, but nodded her head slightly, then took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she let me go.

I took her hand in mine and brought her fingers to my lips. It was an instinctive move on my part, an attempt to soothe her when I didn’t really know how. I’d not been in female company for fifteen years. I’d love to say I went out and got laid my first day out of prison, but I had a job to do and I was determined to do it as safely and quickly as I could. Which didn’t leave time for learning to be around women. Giving comfort was something I forgot how to do a long fucking time ago.

“You got nothin’ to be sorry for, Pipsqueak.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Never heard that before.”

I grinned at her. “You haven’t? Good. That was some of my best work.”

“I was being sarcastic.” She gave me a tremulous grin.

“Oh, little Miss Sassy?”

She shrugged. “Maybe.” Then her smile wavered and her chin quivered as she valiantly fought to keep her composure.

“I like sassy. Lets me know you got fight in you.”

She was trembling like a leaf now. I glanced up at Mama and she shook her head slightly, keeping her watchful gaze on Pippa. “I tried to fight them. It’s why they hit me.”

“Did they...” I trailed off, clearing my throat. “Did they rape you, Pippa?”

She shook her head. “No. A-at least, I don’t think so. I-I got hit on the head when they first took me, so I don’t know for certain, but I never felt like I’d been touched.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “They tried to keep me drugged, but I can’t get high from opioids.”

“You seemed like you were pretty high when I found you.” I frowned at her, not sure if she’d been hallucinating or maybe trying to convince herself she didn’t have any memory gaps. Kind of a self-defense mechanism.

“I was really fuzzy. I know they hit me with a higher dose than normal. My guess is, it was enough to knock out a horse because I don’t really have a whole lot of pain. So, yeah. I was really out of it, but I could still process what was happening. I was more startled by the sudden light in the darkness than I was disoriented.” I could tell she understood what I was concerned about. I knew she had to be heavily drugged. “I swear, I’m not being delusional. I really do have a resistance to opioids. They take away my pain, but I don’t get the euphoric effects.”

“When did you need narcotics, child?” Mama had a stethoscope in her ears and placed the bell on Pippa’s chest.

“When I had my appendix out. They gave me something to help me relax before they tried to put me under, but it didn’t work. Neither did the gas they used to put me under before the procedure. The fact I was affected at all by what those bastards drugged me with means they really hit me hard.”

“I’m going to take some blood, honey.” Mama tied a tourniquet around Pippa’s upper arm before swabbing her inner elbow with an alcohol swab and quickly inserting the needle to take her blood into several tubes. “I’ve got a friend who’ll process this for me with a comprehensive drug screen. I’ll know what they used on you in a couple of hours.”

“Will you, um, you know.” She twisted her fingers together nervously. “Check for other things, too?”

Mama studied her as she finished labeling the tubes with Pippa’s name. “I can do the standard HIV/Hepatitis screen. Do you want me to do a swab? Just in case?”

Pippa gave me a sad, resigned look. “I think maybe it’s a good idea.”

“I’ll step just outside the office door and give you privacy, Pippa. But I promise I won’t leave. I’ll be right back when Mama tells me it’s OK.” I have no idea why I said that. She might not have cared. Probably didn’t care since she didn’t know me from Adam. But I had this driving need to take care of her. Maybe it was because I’d already started thinking of her as my old lady. I’d learned how a man should treat his woman from my father and how he treated our mom. What I said to Pippa was something my dad would have said to Mom.

“You promise?” Pippa’s gaze was both hopeful but resigned. Like she didn’t really expect much, but needed to believe she could have it all.

“Yeah, honey. I promise. All you have to do is holler for me and I’ll be in here before you shut your mouth.” That got a small smile from her. So I put my hand on her head, leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Not much, but I’ll take it. I’m just out here.”

“Your name’s Gunnar?”

“Yeah, honey. Gunnar Gill.”

“Thank you. Thanks for rescuing me.” Two tears fell from her luminous eyes, and I felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart.

“You never have to thank me for that.” My voice was husky as I tried to swallow the sudden lump in my throat. I pointed to the door. “I’m just out here.” She nodded, and I stepped out of Mama’s office and shut the door behind me.

I turned around to find Ice and Cyclone standing from where they’d been waiting in the small outer office. I scowled at them, keeping my arms loose at my side in case I needed to defend myself. “Post a guard outside if you want, but I don’t want you here.”

“Gunnar, we’re sorry,” Ice offered. Cyclone looked down at his feet, not meeting my gaze.

“Yeah. I can see that. If it makes you feel better, we’re only staying until Mama says she can leave. I’ve already talked to Torpedo and Bohannon. They’re gonna take me in at Kiss of Death.”

That finally got Cyclone’s attention. “Kiss of Death MC. You’d leave Bones? Your home club?”

“This hasn’t been my home for fifteen damn years, Dan.”

“And who’s fault is that?” Ice -- Cliff -- stepped toward me in an aggressive move. If he thought I would back down from him because he was my older brother, it was time he learned just how wrong he was.

“It’s the fault of that son of a bitch Hannah was dating,” I snapped back, taking my

own aggressive step forward. “One of us had to do it. I happened to be the one there at the time.”

“And yours.” Ice shoved me back, but I stood my ground. “All you had to do was call Dad. Tell him what happened, and he’d have taken care of it. Why didn’t you do that, huh?”

“I had my reasons, and would do the same thing in the same situation. I don’t regret one single second of my time in prison.”

“What reason could you possibly have for not letting Dad take care of that killin’? No one would have ever found the body or known what happened to that fuck. They certainly wouldn’t have been angry with you for killin’ him. Why didn’t you just let the club do what needed done?”

“Not your business and not something I’m ever gonna tell anyone.” I thought I heard Pippa whimper and realized I wasn’t calming her anxiety by yelling at my brothers.

Cyclone tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at me. “You don’t have to.” He and Ice exchanged a look. “Hannah knows.”

“Yes,” I conceded. “And if she’s not told you in the last fifteen years, she’s not telling you anything now.”

“We’ll see.” Ice gave me a superior smirk that had made me want to hit him in the head with a rock when I was a kid. Had pretty much the same effect now.

“So, after all these years, now you want to know what happened? You guys came by at Christmas and that was it!”

“Dad came every week, askin’ for the truth of it. Begged you to tell him. He’s on his

way here now, you know. Was on the ground with ExFil in France on some high-profile babysitting detail. I called him right after you called me, and he was on the company jet back to Somerset as of twenty minutes ago. Dad will get this out of you. If he doesn't, I'll get it out of Hannah."

"No. You won't. And neither will Dad. It's done. I served my time. I'll finish my parole and try to find a normal life for myself."

"You can do it here," Ice urged.

"Not happening. Not after the warm welcome I got."

"Why would you expect anything other than the reception you got?" Cyclone was pissed as shit, but he wasn't the only one. "You've been out of prison for weeks. You didn't bother to let any of us know. Instead, you dragged a half dead woman into the compound, not knowing if you were followed or not, and you still expect a warm welcome?"

I lunged for my older brother, driving the heel of my hand into his chin. From the way his eyes widened the split second after I moved, Cyclone had thought he'd see any move I made in time to defend himself, if not get the jump on me and go on the offensive. What he hadn't realized was, telegraphing your movements like that in prison would get you killed. I'd gotten good at being unpredictable and fast. Another strike out with my hand smashed his nose.

This time Cyclone stumbled backward, backing off to reassess the situation. He wasn't giving up, but neither was I.

"What the fuck is going on out here?" Mama threw open the door and stomped between me and Cyclone. She shouldn't have bothered because Cyclone was shaking his head as he backed off. "Daniel Gill, get your ass outta my office! If you can't be a

decent fuckin' human being, don't come in here anymore. And this is your only warning." Mama stomped the two steps separating the two of us and jabbed her finger against his chest. "Next time you say or do something utterly stupid, I will call for your fuckin' patch."

"How do you know it was me who was stupid?"

"Really, Cyclone?" I drawled. "Are we twelve?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. Why assume it was me?"

Mama smacked the side of his head. "Because when you get something in your head, you won't leave it alone. You're pissed at your baby brother because he grew up faster than you and doesn't need your help anymore. And while you're trying to take out your anger on Gunnar, you're also taking it out on a young woman who doesn't deserve anyone's anger. Gunnar can take care of himself. Right now, Pippa cannot."

Cyclone winced. "Fuck. I didn't think about it that way."

"You didn't fuckin' think at all," Mama snapped. "Now stop being such a fuckwit and admit you missed your brother."

Cyclone rubbed the back of his neck, glancing between Mama and me with a pained expression. "I... fuck. You're right," he admitted grudgingly. "I've been an asshole."

I clenched my jaw, seconds from walking out, leaving Bones for good. I mean, I was leaving. How long I stayed gone and to what extent I kept in touch was still up for debate. The tension was palpable and the absolute only reason I hadn't already gotten the hell outta Dodge was because I wasn't leaving Pippa behind. Not even with Mama and Pops.

“I’m only here until Mama says Pippa is OK to travel. Last thing I want to do is bring trouble to your door.” I did my best to keep the sneer out of my voice but wasn’t sure I managed. “Torpedo and Bohannon said we could hole up there as long as we like.”

“Stay here, Gunnar.” Ice held out a hand to me, wanting me to take it. I wanted to, but I wasn’t ready. I knew everyone was angry with me for how things went down. Not because I’d confessed to killing the man who’d assaulted my sister, but for me not even trying to fight the charges and mount a defense. But mostly for making my mother cry.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea. For so many damned reasons I don’t even want to think about them.” We were all silent for a long moment, them studying me, me studying them. All three of us trying to figure out how to get the upper hand. Finally, it was Cyclone who broke the silence. I’d never wanted to hit my brother more in my life than I did in that moment.

“You want to get out of here before either of them can get here.” Cyclone sat back in a chair and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee, all smug like he’d won this round. Which he might have. “Who are you afraid of seeing most? You know. Now that you’re out of prison and all the monitors and guards and inmates listening aren’t a factor?” That smug expression on his face was nearly my undoing. “Mom? Or Hannah?”

“Fuckin’ Christ.” Mama grabbed my upper arm and tugged me back inside her clinic before I could attack my brother again. “When Angel and Hannah get here, the two of you are on your own. You’ve effectively ruined any chance of convincing Gunnar to keep Pippa here instead of leaving just when Angel got him back.” She shot my brothers an angry, exasperated look. “God help you when Cain finds you, because this time, it’s not Gunnar who’ll make your mother cry. And your father will be less tolerant with the two of you than he was with Gunnar because your infraction was completely uncalled for.” She shoved me toward Pippa where my woman lay on the

stretcher, then shut the door behind us.

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Pippa

I could hear Gunnar arguing with the men outside. It sounded like they were pissed as shit, but I couldn't make out much of it because my ears were ringing and the room was spinning. "Why did I have to experience my first time being high like this?" I had no idea who I was talking to or even if anyone was there.

"Not to worry, dear." An older woman with steel-gray hair and piercing blue eyes leaned over me and gave me a kind smile. "I'm sure there will be other, more enjoyable times to explore."

"No, there won't." I was emphatic, shaking my head, which only made the disorientation worse. "I'd never be able to afford the amount of drugs it took to get me this high."

She handed me a bottle of water. "Drink up child. The more fluids you get in you, the better you'll feel."

She was right. I was thirsty as shit so I took a long pull, savoring the cool liquid sliding down my throat like I hadn't been able to before. In the Humvee I'd been hurt, scared, and more than a little nauseous. I know I managed to drink some, but not nearly enough. Now that I'd had a moment to register just how delicious it was, I gulped down several more swallows. Mama helped me undress, making sure to always keep me covered. I swear, the woman was a saint. Gunnar had put clean clothes on me when he'd found me, so my clothes weren't soiled enough they needed to be thrown out. It was more the thought of what they represented. Mama tossed the garments in the trash and tied the bag shut without a word.

“The night they took me, I was at a party for a friend’s birthday.” I wasn’t sure why I was telling Mama this, but I wanted to get it out now for some reason. “We’d all gone to a local bar and I snuck in. Since I hadn’t planned on ordering myself anything other than water or soda, I figured I’d be OK as long as I stayed away from anyone who might check an I.D. after I got in. A guy struck up a conversation with me and handed me a drink. Obviously, those were my first and second mistakes all rolled into one.”

Mama raised an eyebrow at me. “Which were?”

“First, I’m not old enough to drink and had never drunk before. I thought I was prepared but I grossly underestimated the atmosphere. The first time, in a bar, by myself, was not the place to experiment with alcohol, but I liked the guy and wanted to fit in. My second mistake was also because I’m not old enough to drink and I had to rely on someone else to purchase my drinks. Which meant accepting something intentionally mind-altering from a man I didn’t know, that I couldn’t verify hadn’t been laced with something.”

She stared at me for several seconds before I spoke. “That’s a bunch of lessons.”

I huffed out a breath. “You know what I mean!”

“Of course, I do. So he did drug you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You... don’t know?”

“We were at that bar for hours. He kept ordering me drinks and I kept accepting them. We laughed and flirted. I’d indicated I’d be interested in sex, but he hadn’t taken the step to take me outside. Probably because I was nowhere near drunk.

“After a while, he got agitated. I thought he was mad at me and told him I thought it was best if I leave, but he smiled and said he’d had a stressful day at work. He did a double shot of whisky and soon after was back to his charming self. Anytime I thought he was going to lose his temper, he’d take another drink.

“I caught him stirring my drink with his finger once. He said they’d shorted me on the alcohol, and he’d topped my glass off with some of his and was mixing it so it would blend properly. Again, I should have been suspicious, but I was having fun. It was the first time I’d ever been to something like that party and I wanted to experience all the moment had to offer.”

“You’re too reckless with your own life, sweetheart. You need someone to have your back.” Mama sat on the edge of my bed and took my hand in hers. “What happened then?”

“We just... kept drinking. He was matching me drink for drink after a while. After he’d touched my drink before, I watched him closely. I knew I wasn’t going to get drunk, judging by the fact this guy was about to fall off the barstool and I was starting to seriously believe I’d been drinking the foulest tasting water known to man. Because I’ve decided I’m seriously not a fan of whisky. It burns. And I still wasn’t drunk.”

“I think I see what you mean. You said this was the night they took you. How did they get you out of that bar and to their compound?”

“Three more guys approached us after that. I got up to pretend to go to the bathroom so I could bolt, but two of the men dragged the first guy off while the biggest of the three clamped a hand over my mouth and pulled me around the corner of the bar and out the back, then one of them hit me in the head and knocked me silly long enough to get me inside their van.

“They shot me up with more drugs in the back of a van on the way to the place Gunnar found me. I kept fighting and they kept shooting me up. It took them five tries before I was finally incapacitated. I heard them complain while they held me in that place how keeping me drugged was going to seriously eat into their profits if they had to hold on to me long.”

Mama looked equal parts pissed as shit and slightly amused. “Impressive. Did they keep you drugged the whole time you were there?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think they could have. Every time they drugged me, the more it took to put me under. At some point, I’m sure I’m going to withdraw from whatever they gave me. At least, I guess that’s how it works. I don’t feel the need to have more, and I’m really glad the fog is lifting. The conversation with you helped to brush back some cobwebs.”

“Good. Now. Let’s see if we can get the worst of the grime off you before putting clean clothes on.” She had a basin of warm, soapy water and a couple of washcloths. She took one and I took the other. I worked on my front while Mama was behind me working on my back. She let me do what I could, but I was still really weak, and in the end she had to help me finish. Once done, she brought me some soft cotton shorts and a T-shirt, along with an unopened pack of underwear. “Let’s get you dressed, then we can check on the boys before they start World War Three in my lobby.”

The voices of the men outside the door got louder. I recognized Gunnar’s voice, even though I hadn’t had a real conversation with him. I doubt I’d ever forget his voice.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Exasperated, Mama stomped to the door and yanked it open. “What the fuck is going on out here?” She closed the door firmly behind her.

I sat up, turning to let my legs hang over the side of the small bed. My head still had a few cobwebs but the conversation with Mama had helped. Other than kind of being

sick to my stomach, I didn't hurt anywhere else. Though, I was pretty sure I looked terrible and smelled like shit. I thought it funny that I felt safe enough to worry about my appearance and personal hygiene given everything I'd gone through.

Of all the people I expected to make any kind of appearance in my life, Knuckles hadn't been on the Bingo card. Of course, my mother had told me about him, and I'd be lying if I said even the thought of Knuckles didn't terrify me, but given the circumstances, if he'd sent Gunnar to rescue me, then I'd trust him and Gunnar until they proved to be untrustworthy.

Besides, I was fairly certain Knuckles would do whatever he had to, to get me to safety. He'd told me once he'd always watch over me. Now, I knew exactly which parent I could trust to have my back. But only Gunnar and Knuckles. Everyone else could kiss my ass and lick the hole. Even Mama. She projected nothing but calm and reassurance, but it wasn't hard to see there was something dangerous about her. Even though she had to be in her seventies, she wore a tank top that showed her arms and a flash of midriff when she moved. Sure, her skin was aging and not as tight as a younger woman's, but Mama was more fit than most women less than half her age. She was definitely not someone I wanted to underestimate.

Mama opened the door, tugging Gunnar with her by his upper arm. "Inside, Gunnar. Go sit with your woman." OK, that tone of voice from Mama was new. She'd seemed like the soft-spoken grandma type. Not so much now. She gave a little shake of her head. "Hard-headed bastards. All of 'em." She fixed her gaze on me and pursed her lips. "I'm sorry, Pippa. We're not usually so unwelcoming to newcomers. Especially when they come to us with one of our own." Her tone was back to being gentle and sweet, but now that I'd seen that small peek of who this woman really was, I couldn't unsee it.

"I don't want to cause problems. Especially not with family." I wanted to look at Gunnar, but couldn't bring myself to do it. If I saw regret or condemnation in his

eyes, it might well be my undoing. And I really had no idea why I'd latched on to this man. Because, logically, I knew it was the idea he represented. The black knight on a white steed. The bad guy tempered with the smallest bit of good. A man who could keep me from ever getting kidnapped again, and who would punish those who took me in the first place. That was Gunnar. I knew I could trust him, no matter what.

"Trust me when I tell you, Pippa, my dear, none of this is your fault. It's this one refusing to let his family help him when he was little more than a child, and those knuckleheads out there for being knuckleheads." Her dry tone was the perfect reflection of the look she leveled on Gunnar. "Now. Here's what's going to happen."

"Uh-oh." Gunnar dropped his head. "Here it comes."

"Excuse me, young man?" If there was ever the stereotypical image of a cross Catholic nun, Mama looked every inch of her. Well, except for the tank top displaying toned, leathered skin, the thick, steel-gray hair in a long braid down her back, the leather pants and motorcycle boots. But hey! The pants were black and the top white. Same colors.

Gunnar raised his hands in surrender. "Nothin', Mama. Nothin' at all. Please continue."

Mama let her disapproving stare linger on Gunnar until he lowered his gaze in surrender. "Pippa." When she turned her focus back to me, her gaze was once again warm and welcoming. The sweet little granny about to impart the most insightful advice imaginable. "You go take a shower and clean up. I'll help with your hair when you get out. We'll get you feeling more like yourself in no time."

Gunnar sighed heavily. "Mama --"

"No arguments, Gunnar. This is happening."

“You know why I want to get us out of here.”

“I do. And it’s time you sucked it up and told your father and mother what happened. Not for yourself, but for Hannah. She isn’t the type to keep anything from Cain and Angel and her guilt has been eating her alive for fifteen years. And not just because she didn’t tell them what happened. She stabbed a man to death. Sure, he was trying to rape her, but she took his life. Up close and personal. Because you told her not to say a word, she felt like she owed you whatever you asked of her. Hannah’s kept everything bottled up inside. She’s going to destroy herself. I know you tried to take all the blame and the punishment, but she lost the same fifteen years of her life as you did.”

Gunnar grunted like she’d struck him, and I immediately reached for Gunnar’s hand. “Please don’t be mean to him. I don’t think he’s a bad person. I don’t believe you think he is either.”

Mama gave me an impatient glare. “Of course, he’s not a bad person. He confessed to murdering his sister’s boyfriend because he said the guy had threatened to hurt Hannah. The fact was, Hannah had killed the bastard when he tried to rape her. She had a knife her father and brothers insisted she keep on her. When things got rough, she stabbed the bastard in the kidney. Gunnar took the rap so nothing would touch his sister and, in the process, cut his parents out of the decision-making process and pled guilty. Those, my dear, are not the actions of a bad person. Maybe someone a little shy in the brains department, but not a bad person at all.”

There was a soft gasp, and I noticed a striking, petite woman with soft brown hair streaked with silver. She looked to be in her early- to mid-fifties. At first, I thought I must look worse than I thought, but she wasn’t looking at me. She was staring at Gunnar with a heartbreaking mixture of shock, pain, grief, and love.

“Mom, this isn’t a good idea.” Ice tried to grab his mother’s arm. Cyclone was right

behind them. Both men glanced at Mama, who leveled her gaze on them like the strictest teacher known to man. “Gunnar and, uh, his, uh, friend there, will be out in a minute.”

The woman shoved herself away from her sons and moved toward Gunnar in a daze. “You’re home?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m home.”

She lunged for Gunnar, throwing her arms around him and sobbing like her heart was breaking. I knew she’d heard what Mama had said, but she didn’t comment on it. I was pretty sure that would come later.

Mama moved to my side and put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. She gave me an encouraging look but said nothing until Gunnar’s mother finally pulled back to look at her son. She framed his face in her hands and stroked his face like he was the most precious thing in her world.

“Angel?” When Gunnar’s mother looked back at Mama, she continued. “This is Pippa. Gunnar rescued her from a rival club at the request of his cellmate.”

Angel gasped before her gaze darted to me. “Oh, no. Are you hurt, Pippa? How can I help?”

“I...” I had no idea what to say. Was I hurt? Maybe not physically, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever be the same person I was before I was taken. The more people I didn’t know surrounded me, the more anxious I was. “I’m fine.”

“Mom, I promise I’ll sit down and talk to you later, but I’m taking Pippa to Nashville. Torpedo and Bohannon have agreed to take me in at Kiss of Death.”

“You’re not staying here?” Angel looked from Gunnar to me and back. “There’s no reason you both can’t stay.” She looked at me, taking a step toward me as if pleading for me to tell Gunnar to stay with his family. “I might be able to help you. You know. Talk. Me and Suzie both were taken by a member of Kiss of Death before Cain and Torpedo decided to take it over. That was years ago. But I know how terrified and helpless I felt before I escaped.”

I gasped before turning to look at Gunnar for some context because Kiss of Death sounded like the kind of place I wanted to avoid at all costs. He shrugged. “The men who were responsible for takin’ women and children are dead. The club was purged. Torpedo and Bohannon kept the name because it was established in the area already. Despite being run by murderers and pedophiles, Cain said their reputation for doing business was impeccable. Besides, apparently having it known that Bones cleaned the scourge that was Kiss of Death without a trace left helps keep rival MCs and local gangs in line.”

Then Gunnar gave Cyclone a hard look. “And there is a reason we can’t stay, Mom. I’ll be in touch, and you’ll know where I am. I already texted you my new number, but I’ll do it again in case you missed it or didn’t recognize the number and ignored it.”

It was obvious Gunnar was doing his best to remain calm around his mother. It was also obvious how much he was hurting with every second he was in her presence. Angel seemed like a good person and was super concerned about Gunnar, but if she’d made him feel like he was an embarrassment to her because he’d been in prison, I might have to hurt her. No matter how much Gunnar loved her, I wasn’t about to watch the man who’d risked his life to get me out of hell, then saw to my safety be degraded or belittled.

“I’ve not even had a chance to talk to you. Surely you can stay tonight.” Again, she smiled in my direction. “Besides, you haven’t had the chance to introduce me to

Pippa.” Angel’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, and I softened toward the other woman. Yeah, there was no need to worry Angel thought her son less somehow for what he’d done and gone through. This was a woman who was just grateful to have her son back.

Gunnar pulled his mother into his arms and held her tight. “I’ve missed you, Mom. I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Is what Mama said true? Did you take the blame for that bastard’s death?” Angel didn’t let go of her son or insist on looking him in the eyes when she asked. It was almost like she didn’t really want to know. I could imagine it, because it sounded like Gunnar’s sister was carrying a boatload of guilt.

“Does it matter, Mom? I mean, really matter? I’m out. I’m OK. Now, I’m trying to be the kind of man Dad always expected me to be.”

“Honey, you are the man your dad wanted you to be and have been for a long time. Since before you went to prison. What you did was something your dad would have done. If he tries to tell you how he’d have been smart and asked for help, he’s lying.” Angel finally pulled back and smiled at her son, laying her hand on his cheek again. “When I came to see you a few weeks ago, and they told me you weren’t there, I was scared out of my mind.” She took in a shuddering breath. “Especially since the last time I saw you, we fought.”

Gunnar sighed. “I wasn’t angry at you, Mom. I was worried about Hannah and took out my fear and frustration on you. Every week you came to visit, you asked me to tell you what happened. Without exception. Every week for fifteen years. I’d have been worried if you hadn’t asked.” He glanced away. “It would have felt like you’d given up on me.”

“I’ve missed you so much, honey. I know Hannah didn’t come often, but I see now

she felt guilty. I could see it in her every day and thought it was because she looked at it as you going to jail because she ratted out that bastard. Now, I know why.”

“Is she with you?”

“Yes. She’s probably standing outside the door wringing her hands. It’s what she’s done since she found out you were out of prison. Each day that passed without us hearing from you, the more she withdrew from us.”

Gunnar gave me a helpless look, like he didn’t know what to do, when I’d bet my life this man was never indecisive.

“Go hug your sister,” I said softly. “Sounds like you both got shit on, and she’s hurting just as badly as you are.”

He hesitated but reached over to squeeze my hand. “I won’t be long.”

“No. You need to spend some time with your mother and sister. You need this. Sounds like they do too.”

“How about we compromise.” Gunnar stepped closer to me, holding my hand in both of his. “You take a bath and clean up. Take as much time as you want. Lay down and sleep the rest of that drug off. I’ll come get you in a couple of hours and we’ll head south.”

“They said your dad was out of the country or something, earlier? Did I hear that?”

“Yeah. He’s on his way back now, but it’s a long-ass flight.”

“I think you really might be avoiding your father.” I kept my expression as blank as I could until Mama barked out a laugh before clapping a hand over her face. Then

Angel and Mama both started laughing and I couldn't help but smile.

Gunnar shook his head, but he was grinning. "Wait until you meet my dad. You'll understand."

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Gunnar

I had no intention of waiting around until my dad got here. Not necessarily because I didn't want to face him yet, though I'd admit to being a little... apprehensive. If my brothers had given us this kind of welcome, I had no idea if they were playing off my father or simply protecting their families. I could kind of understand the second, but if that was the case, they didn't see me and Pippa as important as the rest of the family. I was already roiling on the inside. The last thing I wanted was confirmation of how badly I'd fucked up with my dad.

Pippa squeezed my hand and gave me a small smile. She was doing this for me when I could tell she didn't want to be by herself. But she didn't know me. I thought she might trust me since I'd been the one to rescue her, but she had to be questioning everything around her after finding out what I'd done. It was just one more blow to my chest, because I intended to keep my promise to Knuckles. I would claim Pippa as my old lady whether she wanted me to or not. With that claim, I'd treat her with the respect an old lady deserves. If she didn't want me in any other capacity, that was her choice, but I'd always be there to protect and care for her until I died, or Knuckles revoked the privilege.

"Mama, is there somewhere Pippa can have some privacy to clean up and rest?"

"You can bring her home," my mother interjected, reaching out to take Pippa's hand. Mom looked like she was barely holding on to more tears. Though she was trying to give Pippa a welcoming smile, her lower lip trembled and her eyes were glossy with unshed tears.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mom.” I tried to be as gentle as I could while trying to do what I felt was best for Pippa. I wanted her comfortable. While my mother and sister would be nice to Pippa, I knew my brothers didn’t want us here, not really, and having us stay for any length of time would cause friction between my mother and sister and my brothers. And I hadn’t even seen Hannah yet.

“Just until you get ready to leave.” Mom gave me a pleading look. “That way you won’t have to leave Pippa in a strange place by herself.” Trust my mother to cut to the root of the problem. She had always known me better than anyone else.

“I have a better idea.” Mama crossed her arms over her chest and glanced to the door where my brothers were just outside. “You can bring Pippa to my house. Pops can keep out anyone you don’t want to talk with, and you will be close to Pippa.”

“Surely you don’t think someone would hurt Pippa while she’s inside this compound.” My mother looked from me to Mama. “This is the safest place she could possibly be.”

“Angel, the president and vice president of Bones are under the impression they are protecting the women and children in the club. Given both their wives are pregnant, their protective instincts are on high alert.”

Mom narrowed her eyes at Mama before looking back to my brothers. “Gunnar would never put this club or anyone inside it in danger intentionally. He’s family. Anyone he says needs our protection will get it.” Her fierce defense of me chipped away at the ice around my heart. It was hard enough to see my mother this upset, because I knew how much her family meant to her. She would be horrified that my brothers would even consider turning us out on our own.

“Like it or not, Mom, they’re doing what’s best for the club and everyone inside. I can take care of Pippa. I have a plan in place. We’ll be all right.”

Mom's gaze flitted to Pippa, then back to Mama before reluctantly nodding. No doubt she'd hoped to get me home so she could convince me to stay. If I was honest, part of me wanted to go with her. I'd been sixteen when I'd gone to prison. I wasn't a kid by any means, but I still missed my mother. Seeing her on the other side of bulletproof glass or in a room with a dozen or more people I didn't know where half of them were convicted felons just wasn't the same. I hadn't been able to give her a hug in fifteen years. Or Hannah.

"I thought Pippa was your woman." Mom looked confused as she looked back at Mama. "You said she was his woman."

"She's his." Mama didn't sound the least bit unsure. "He just hasn't told her yet."

"This isn't the place for this." My soft tone was deceptive because I was starting to get pissed. Mama was the best of the best. She'd helped raise me and all my brothers and sisters, but she was deliberately pushing me, trying to bully me into telling my parents everything. The truth was, I wasn't ready. But more importantly, the last thing I wanted to do was frighten Pippa.

"What haven't you told me?" Pippa met my gaze with wide, guileless eyes when I suspected she was anything but. She was trying to pretend there wasn't a possibility she was in a worse situation than what she'd just escaped.

"I swear I'll tell you later, but I think you really need some food, a shower, and some rest. But I promise you, you're safe. And you have the right to refuse any claim I have on you. This is as much for your protection as it was to keep a promise to a very good friend."

"Knuckles?"

"Yeah, baby. Knuckles asked me to rescue you and protect you after I got you free."

He told me to make you my old lady, so that's what I'm gonna do. How much you want to be involved with me is up to you, but you will have my property patch and the protection of my club."

"Isn't this your club?" Her expression was carefully neutral, but I could tell she was trying to make a point. Bones should have been my club. Cain had been letting me go with them on runs and teaching me how to handle myself in combat, all trying to prepare me for taking my place in the club and in my father's paramilitary organization, ExFil. I had planned on putting in my time in the military, maybe even doing teams training and serving an extended enlistment. All with the goal of taking my place with the rest of my family as part of Bones. In a way, Bones MC was more important to me than anything on that list of life goals because Bones was family. Until everything changed.

"It was." I smiled to soften the blow those words caused to myself. "And it will always be important to me. But I chose this path. Now I have to accept the consequences and follow it. Kiss of Death has some family too. Just as close as everyone here. Mom knows that. Everything will work out."

Pippa's gaze shifted to the door where Ice and Cyclone stood just outside the open clinic door, listening and whispering to each other. "I think you're right." When she met my gaze again, she held it. "I'll trust you. You know what's best. They might not want us here, but they've not said anything to indicate you're like the people you rescued me from. Besides, you've been really nice to me. I'd probably be..." She trailed off and the color drained from her face. "I don't want to think about it."

"You don't have to because it's not going to happen. I swore to Knuckles I'd protect you with my life, and that's what I intend on doing." I grinned at her before addressing Mama. "We'll take you up on your offer, Mama." When Mom gave a distressed whimper, Ice went to her, putting his arms around her. "I want you and Hannah to come with me and Pippa. I need to spend as much time with the two of

you as I can before me and Pippa leave. I've missed you, and I want Pippa to know you guys."

Mom gave me a watery smile. "We missed you too. Mama, me, and Hannah will come to you in a bit. I need to make a stop to pick up some clothes for Pippa." Mom smiled at my woman. "I don't have time to get anything expensive, but I can get you new underwear, socks, and shoes, as well as a couple pairs of jeans and three or four T-shirts. If you have to leave, we'll make sure you're ready for the trip." Mom brushed a tear from her cheek as she reached for Pippa, pulling her into a warm embrace. "Please don't judge us because Cliff and Daniel are being assholes. They're not bad men either. Just... hurt their little brother didn't need their help."

Mom let Pippa go but not before she spilled more tears as she traced one dark bruise on Pippa's face with gentle fingers. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

Pippa shrugged, trying for a tremulous smile but coming up a little short. "It worked out. At least, I hope it has." Pippa lowered her gaze. She obviously had her doubts -- and I didn't blame her -- but I thought she was probably too weak and tired to worry about it.

"Good, then." Mama had been busy moving around the room getting supplies she thought she might need. I knew she had things at her house, but all her medicines were here where she used them most. "I let Pops know you'd need your own room and he's making sure you're all set. If you don't mind, I'd like to give you a tetanus shot and a shot of penicillin. When I get your test results back, I can give you something else if need be."

Pippa nodded. "Absolutely. I was gonna ask if you thought I needed something."

"I've got you covered, dear. Before you leave, Pops will bring you a phone. It will have mine and Angel's numbers in it. I want you to promise to call one of us if you

don't feel well, or if you just need some female backup. We'll round up the old ladies in force and burn that place to the ground if they don't treat you right."

"I'd like to think you're kidding, but I really don't think you are." Pippa's smile was genuine this time. And so fucking beautiful I almost fell to my knees and worshiped her. She had to be terrified out of her mind, but she was easily the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. It was at that moment I knew I'd do anything to have with this woman what my mother and father had. What Mama and Pops had. What so many of my friends had found while I was locked away.

This woman was my destiny. I knew it like I knew my own name. My life was finally coming into focus with a clarity I'd never expected. Now all I had to do was prove myself worthy of her which... That ship had already sailed. No way a man who'd gone to prison for murder was good enough for the angelic vision before me.

Fine. I might not be worthy of her, but I'd be the most vicious protector anyone could find for her. She'd be my most treasured possession, the person I kept safe and close at all times. I'd be the demon to her angel. And I'd give my last Goddamned breath to see her safe and happy for the rest of my life.

* * *

Pippa

Gunnar helped me into the big-ass Humvee we'd used to get to this place. His touch was gentle as he made sure I was settled comfortably in the back seat next to him. I didn't buckle my seat belt because, now that it had been a while since I'd been drugged and all that shit was finally getting out of my system, I was starting to feel every ache and pain I had from my extended stay in hell. I was exhausted and sore, but determined to stay awake for the drive to Mama's house.

“It’s not far.” Gunnar put his arm around me in an awkward gesture. It was almost like he didn’t know what to do with himself. Like he wanted to touch me but was unsure how to go about it. “Just a couple minutes and you can get some decent food in you and rest.”

I nodded, giving him a small smile. “Just tired. And really looking forward to that shower.”

He chuckled, leaning in to brush a kiss against my temple. It wasn’t a gesture he seemed comfortable with but either felt like he should, or he wanted to and wasn’t sure how to go about it. “I bet. Everything’s gonna be fine. I’ll take care of everything.”

I couldn’t lie, even to myself. The idea someone had my back and would protect me until I could get my life back was comforting on an elemental level. I hadn’t had the meltdown I needed, and I knew it would come. I suppose when the time came, I’d find out exactly how serious Gunnar was about this whole old lady thing. Assuming that was like a wife or a permanent relationship. I wasn’t savvy with biker lingo. After the last month of my life in that horrible place, I wasn’t as alarmed by Gunnar inserting himself into my life as I probably should be.

As we drove, I couldn’t help sneaking glances at Gunnar. He was incredibly handsome in a very edgy, even deadly, way. With his shaggy dark hair and intense eyes, he had my attention. But more than that, there was a quiet strength about him that made me feel safe. Probably because he’d rescued me and I knew getting in and out of the place had been more of a feat than I had been able to appreciate at the time. I knew I shouldn’t trust him so quickly after everything I’d been through, but I couldn’t help it. Simply being near him made me feel safe. No matter how awkward his gestures. The man was trying. The more I thought about it, the more I kind of found it charming.

He was right about the ride. It was less than two minutes. It actually took longer for the men who brought us here to get out of the vehicle with all the crap they had on their tactical vests. Gunnar didn't have a vest on now, but I had vague memories of being juggled around so he could shrug his vest off once we were on the road after my rescue.

We pulled up in front of a ranch-style house. It was by far the biggest in the area, and the whole compound seemed to have been built around this house and the main clubhouse where we'd met Mama. The main building was more like an older resort hotel or something. There was even a courtyard in the back. Mama's house wasn't far from the main building, but far enough there was room for other houses to spring up near it, making Mama and Pops -- whom I had yet to meet -- the center of the club.

"I thought you bastards would never bring that sweet girl here so she could eat and rest." A man who looked to be a few years older than Mama exited the house and skipped down the three steps from the porch like a youngster. He had on faded jeans and a tight, white T-shirt. It had to be at least as old as Mama and, again, though his skin was aged and sun-leathered, he had firm, bulky muscle underneath. He wasn't as big as the other men around us, but there was something in his gaze that told me he was more dangerous than he seemed. "I've got burgers and dogs hot off the grill with all the fixins. Best I could do in a couple of hours."

Mama got out of the Explorer the women had come in as the man spoke. "I think that will do just fine, Pops. Can't go wrong there." She smiled and went to the older man. He pulled her to him with one arm and kissed the top of her head before letting her go. Mama looked up at him and gave the man a soft smile, then she came to me. "Come on, Pippa. Do you want food or a shower first?"

"I think the crackers you let me nibble on earlier along with the water will let me get clean first." I cringed as I fingered my hair. "I'm not sure even a shower is gonna fix this mess."

Mama put her arm around me, effectively removing me from Gunnar's reach with little effort. I looked over my shoulder and whimpered before I could stop myself.

Gunnar immediately stepped closer, his brow furrowed with concern as he reached for me, taking my hand in his firm grip. "What's wrong, Pippa? Are you in pain?"

I shook my head, feeling foolish. "No, I just... I don't want you to leave." The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

His expression softened. "I'm not going anywhere, Pippa. I'll be here when you're done getting cleaned up. If it will make you feel better, I'll stand guard outside the bathroom. You need me -- for anything -- call out and I'll break the Goddamned door down to get to you." The more he said, the fiercer his expression, the tighter his hold on my hand until he tugged me away from Mama and wrapped his arms around me in a tight embrace.

Mama patted my arm reassuringly, trying to extract me from Gunnar's hold, but he simply growled at her. Instead of backing down, this tiny, grandmotherly woman pulled me away from Gunnar with gentle encouragement. "Don't you worry, dear. Gunnar will be waiting for you when you're ready. Now let's get you that shower so you can feel more like yourself."

I nodded, allowing Mama to guide me into the house. As we walked, I glanced back one more time to see Gunnar watching me intently. The intensity in his gaze made my breath catch.

Once inside the house, Mama led me to a bedroom in the back of the house. "There are fresh towels and unopened toiletries in the bathroom just there." She pointed to a door in the back corner which was slightly ajar. "Take as long as you need. I've brought you a few things until Angel and Hannah get here with more for the longer haul." She dropped a small bundle of items on the bed just as Gunnar entered the

room.

“Thank you,” I said softly. “For everything.”

Mama patted my shoulder gently. “You’re safe now. That one will see to it you stay that way.” She nodded in Gunnar’s direction. “If there’s something you need that I missed, let Gunnar know and I’ll bring it to you.” She handed me a small flip phone. “It’s not fancy, but it will let you do what you need. It’s also easy to part with if you get in a pinch and are afraid someone is tracking you.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” I whispered. Looking up at Gunnar I know I looked wide-eyed and afraid. “Do you think they’ll come after me?”

“Honey, we didn’t leave anyone alive in that fucking hellhole, and Torpedo’s people cleaned any evidence anyone was ever there. Even if someone suspects what went down, there’s no proof of anything, digital or physical.”

“But --”

Gunnar cut me off. “ But if someone comes after us, we’ve got backup. And I’ll protect you with my life. No one’s gonna hurt you again, Pippa.”

The sincere determination on his face settled something inside me. I was still kind of numb -- I was still a little woozy from the lingering effects of the drug I’d been given -- but it was easier to relax. The shower I was getting ready to take might actually make me feel human on the outside now that my insides were feeling better.

“OK.” It was an inane thing to say, but I believed everything Gunnar said. With my whole being.

He gave me the most heartbreakingly gentle smile I’d ever seen, and tears threatened

to overwhelm me. “OK,” he whispered.

I took the clothing Mama had given me into the bathroom and shut the door, leaning back against it. I took in great gulps of air as I slid to the floor, my legs no longer able to support me. I wanted to cry. Wanted to scream and rage against the whole fucking world and people who could do such evil to other people for money. Maybe I had more of my dad in me than my mother wanted because, right now, I wished those bastards were still alive so I could kill them myself.

I forced myself to take several deep breaths, trying to calm the storm of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. The urge to break down was strong, but I knew if I started crying now I might not stop. And I desperately wanted to feel clean again.

With my body trembling, I pushed myself up off the floor and started peeling off the clothing I’d been given after Mama’s exam. The need to feel human again overrode my exhaustion. If I sat on the floor of the shower and fell asleep, at least some more of the grime would be gone.

I avoided looking in the mirror, not wanting to see how awful I looked or how badly my hair was tangled. Instead, I focused on turning on the shower and adjusting the temperature. My hair hung below my waist in a long, thick mass of curls. There was no doubt in my mind I’d have to cut at least some of it, if not just fucking shave it all. Which, as I touched the tangled, knotted mess now, I admitted to myself wasn’t the worst idea. In fact, I’d put the likelihood of me buzzing it all off at some point in the coming minutes as more probable than possible.

As I stepped under the hot spray, I let out an involuntary sob. Yeah, I needed that breakdown to happen later rather than sooner because I had the feeling if it happened now, I’d have a man I didn’t know in the shower with me whether I wanted him to be or not. Though I’d admired him earlier, I wasn’t in any shape mentally or physically for what would happen if he decided to make good on the old lady stuff.

The water felt heavenly against my skin, washing away any lingering grime and fear. Needing to feel clean, I'd turned the water as hot as I could stand it. I stood there for several long minutes, just letting the water sluice over me before reaching for the shampoo. Three washings later, my hair started to feel clean again, though I probably would have to do it again later. My arms were too heavy to continue. I did manage to work some conditioner through what wasn't matted together, but only because I knew there wouldn't be a snowball's chance in hell of working the knots out otherwise.

As I turned the water off, there was a knock at the door. "Pippa?" Knock . "You all right?" Another knock.

"Um, yeah." My voice shook. More from exhaustion than fear. "Just a little wobbly."

"Did you fall?" There was alarm in his voice. "I'm coming in!"

"No, wait!"

The door was shoved open. I'd locked it on reflex, but this guy broke the door facing with alarming ease. His gaze tracked the small room, looking for threats before focusing on the floor. He read the room so fast it had to have been instinct. "Did you slip? Are you hurt?" When he brought his gaze to me, he eyed me with a clinical gaze until he realized I wasn't hurt.

I stood sideways with one arm over my breasts and one frantically reaching for a towel, which was when I finally did lose my footing. With a cry, I toppled sideways. Right into Gunnar's waiting arms.

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Gunnar

I was gonna die. And I was going to hell. I had a naked woman in my arms. One who had been the sole focus of my existence for four weeks. The same woman I'd sworn to my only friend I'd give the protection of my property patch and make her my old lady. Everything in me was screaming to take care of her, not to objectify her or even look at her as anything other than a young woman who was hurting and vulnerable. Unfortunately, my dick didn't get the Goddamned message.

"I'm so sorry!" Pippa clung to me, breathing hard. She kicked out, trying to get her feet under her, but I lifted her with my arm around her waist. She sucked in a breath, her eyes going wide. "Gunnar?" That breathless whimper was the only thing keeping me from seeing how far she let me take us. But there was no way she was able to consent to anything. And I wasn't nearly ready my own damned self.

"Are you OK?" My voice was a husky groan as need punched through my body like a spear.

She nodded, looking up at me. I couldn't tell if she was frightened or not, but instead of resting passively in my arms, she gripped my shoulders and pulled herself closer to me. Her breasts were mashed against my chest, and I couldn't stop myself from shuddering.

"Words, honey." I cleared my throat. "I need words."

"Yes."

I sat her on the vanity and snagged a towel from the shelf over the toilet. I wrapped the towel around her shoulders and snagged another one to wring her hair out. She tucked the terry cloth under her arms to hold it in place.

Pippa trembled slightly as I gently squeezed water from her long hair with the towel. Her eyes never left mine, wide and uncertain. I tried to focus on the task at hand and not on how soft her skin looked or how badly I wanted to touch her because no matter how much I wanted to, it simply wasn't happening.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble." Her lower lip trembled even as she smiled. "And for getting you wet."

I grinned back at her. "You could never cause any trouble, honey. And I'm the one who barged in here." I winced. "Probably overreacted."

"You were worried about me?"

"Yeah. I was."

"Because you promised my dad you'd protect me." Where before there might have been a budding desire in her eyes, now Pippa looked lost. Resigned even.

I shook my head slowly. "No. And no, I can't talk about it right at the moment because I don't know what to tell you. But it's not because I'm obligated." It was her turn to shiver. She sucked in a breath, and I knew she felt the pull between us too. She gave me a shy smile, lowering her gaze so her eyelashes lay like dark crescents under her eyes. "Do you think you can stand, honey?"

"Yeah." Pippa nodded and slid off the vanity as I stepped back. I kept my hands on her hips to steady her. Good thing too, because she swayed slightly and I realized she was drooping with exhaustion.

“You gonna be able to eat? I think you’ll feel better with something in your stomach, even if it’s just a bite or two.”

“I’ll try. I’m hungry, but I’m dead on my feet.”

“Figured.”

“I’m going to have to cut my hair.” The sad look on her face told me her hair represented more than just hair to her.

“Maybe not. I bet we can save most of it.”

“Are you good with getting mats out of a woman’s hair?”

I shrugged, a smile tugging at my lips at a memory. “I used to be. When me and my sister were little, she had hair so long she had to be careful not to sit on it. She was all the time getting knots in it. No matter how hard she tried to keep it brushed, she would always end up crying and bringing me her brush to help her.”

“How old were you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe seven or eight. She said Mom was too rough. Just like Mom was always too rough cleaning our faces. Like every spot of spaghetti sauce was a personal affront to her.”

“I think that’s a mom thing. Mine was always too rough too.”

“Anyway, Hannah refused to cut her hair, and I hated listening to my sister struggle with taming the wild mass. So, I took care of her.”

“Just like when she defended herself and killed her attacker?”

I should have expected the question, but she slipped it in there as skillfully as any investigator. “Yeah, I guess so.” She didn’t flinch away from me at the reminder of my prison time. I thought I might see fear or something in her expression, but there was only a deep longing. “Did you ever have anyone help you with your hair?”

“No.” She looked away.

“No sisters? Surely your mom helped you.”

She shrugged. “My mom wasn’t what one would call overly demonstrative. If she ever helped me with anything, I don’t remember it.”

I reached for the clothes she’d set on a small make-up table so she didn’t have to walk on shaky legs. “That doesn’t sound very pleasant.”

“I guess it’s what happens when your mother gets pregnant by a prison inmate but has a husband on the outside.”

“Knuckles didn’t tell me that part.”

“That’s because I doubt Knuckles knows. If he does, he’s got Mom completely fooled. She seduced him, intentionally got pregnant by him, introduced us and suckered him into thinking of me as his daughter so he cares about me. At least, that’s what she believes she did.”

“You think your mother had anything to do with your kidnapping?”

“I can’t say for sure either way. And you have no idea how bad that hurts.”

I grunted. “To know the whole reason you were conceived was to hurt someone else.”

“Yeah. The only thing I know about my father is that Mom says he’s a killer and that if he suspects for a moment I’m playing him, he’ll kill me without hesitation.”

“Pippa, Knuckles would never hold you responsible for your mother’s actions. Even if you were guilty of tryin’ to take him out, he’d still give you every benefit of the doubt until he couldn’t.”

“But after that, he would kill me if he thought he had to.”

“Honey, I’m not going to lie and say that, no, he wouldn’t kill you if he thought he had to. But I can’t say he would kill you either. I’ve known him for fifteen years. The only time I ever seen the man show fear was right after he came back to his cell the afternoon he met you. He said the whole prison knew he now had a weakness.”

Pippa gave me a strange look. “I don’t like being a weakness. To anyone.”

“You’re only his weakness because he can’t have anything happen to you. Especially not because of him. Your dad has a lot of enemies, but he’s still as solid as they come. Ain’t gonna say he’s a good man, but he has a strict code he lives by.”

“You trust him?”

That startled me. I hadn’t expected the question. “Yes. Like I said. He’s solid. He might not do something for the reasons you think and he will always find a way to use any situation to his advantage, but he would never intentionally hurt an innocent.”

“Then I’m going to choose to believe Knuckles is better than my mom. Do you know if anyone has been looking for me? Did Mom file a police report or anything?”

Yeah. This girl was smart. And it was going to get her hurt. “You’re so tired your words are slurring, Pippa. We can talk about all this later. I’ll give you as many

answers as I have once you've had a chance to rest. Get dressed and I'll see if I can work through your hair while you eat something."

"There's no way I can eat while you attempt to detangle this rat's nest. Notice I used the word 'attempt.'"

As I'd hoped, I distracted her from the line of questioning she'd opened. Because the answer to her question was a resounding no. Her mother hadn't filed a police report. She also knew full well her daughter was missing because I'd spoken with the woman three weeks before I finally found Pippa, then again just before we executed the rescue. Both times, the woman claimed to have seen her daughter just the day before.

"We makin' bets?"

"I don't have any money. Since I've been gone a month, I'm sure my bank account is overdrawn." She tried to sound flippant, but I could tell she was doing her best to keep reality at bay. She needed to break down and have a good cry or primal scream or something. Instead, I watched as she bottled up all the pent-up fear, anger, and grief inside her and tried to bury it in dark humor. But this woman was hurting.

"How about, if you manage to accomplish anything on my hair without me calling you a son of a bitch while I'm eating, I'll talk Knuckles into getting you out of babysitting duty."

"You're not getting out of this as easy as that, Pippa. I promised Knuckles and, now that I've met you and spent some time in your company, I'm not sure I'm ready to quit this job."

She stared up at me and, in her eyes, I saw the same longing I felt. Then she closed her eyes tightly. When she opened them, her face was blank.

“Do not shut me out, Pippa.” I didn’t mean to snarl at her, but I did. She didn’t recoil, but her eyes widened and she sucked in a breath. “You tell me what you’re thinking, and I tell you what I’m thinking. If we do that, we can get to know each other faster. Now, what are you trying to keep from me?”

“Nothing. Just...” She took a deep breath. “Gunnar, will you kiss me?”

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Gunnar

I'm not really sure what happened. One second I was looking down at Pippa in shock, the next I was kissing her. Just like she'd asked. Once her tongue brushed against mine tentatively, I groaned and did something I never thought I'd do. I surrendered. Not in a submissive sense, but to the woman I'd claimed as mine. To Pippa. She needed something to fill her mind with besides fear and terror. If she wanted a little pleasure with someone to make her feel safe, who was I to deny her? Which brought up a new subset of problems, but I'd figure it the fuck out.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but the silky feel of Pippa's lips, soft and warm against mine, surpassed anything my mind could have dreamed up. The feel of her lips and tongue sliding over mine was the most exquisite, beautiful sensation ever. Nothing in my wildest imaginings could have prepared me for this kiss. Nothing. I cupped her face gently in my hands, deepening the kiss as she melted against me. Her fingers curled into the fabric of my shirt, pulling me closer.

I poured everything I was feeling into that kiss -- my desire to protect her, my growing feelings for her, my need to chase away her pain and fear. Pippa responded with equal intensity, her body pressing flush against mine.

Christ! I wanted to snatch the towel away from her and look my fill at her beautiful body. I also needed, with everything inside me, to look over every single inch of her. Not for admiration. OK, so, not only for admiration. More than anything, I needed to see any visible signs of what those bastards did to her.

Everyone in the clubhouse where she'd been held was dead, but there were more

people responsible. I had the feeling once I got Knuckles' request for a complete list of every injury she had, I'd be required for another task. It was the thought of still having that report to make to Knuckles that helped me get myself back under control.

When I finally ended the kiss and we broke apart, both of us were breathing heavily. Pippa's cheeks were flushed. "Wow." Her hoarse whisper was full of awe, and I wouldn't try to pretend I didn't puff out my chest a little.

I rested my forehead against hers. "Yeah. Wow."

"I've only kissed a couple guys before, Gunnar. That wasn't... I didn't expect..." Pippa trailed off, looking as dazed as I felt.

"Then you're a couple up on me. I went to prison when I was sixteen." The second I spoke, I realized what I'd said. Heat rose to my cheeks and my gaze snapped to hers. My chin rose defiantly as I waited for her derision. She'd either scoff and call me a liar or, worse, laugh at me for being a fucking virgin in my thirties. Instead, her eyes widened and she stared into mine, searching for the truth of my statement.

Then she shook her head, a smile giving her lips a delicate curve. "If that was your first kiss, you're a natural." She wasn't ridiculing me or even amused. Instead, she looked just as shell-shocked as I felt.

I brushed my fingers over her lips, then her jaw. "Ain't had time to find a woman since I got out, so yeah." I spoke like I was in a trance. It was quite possible I was.

"Why?" Her innocent question caught me off guard. Why? Because I'd been too focused on finding her than looking for a woman to get laid. But was that really the reason? Or was it because I'd claimed her the second I'd seen her picture? And that had been long before Knuckles had asked me to make her my old lady. That was when I realized I'd committed my life to this woman before I even met her.

I was stripped bare. There was no way to hide the raw pain and hunger inside me. Or the embarrassment. Yet, I couldn't make myself leave her or to allow her to not choose to stay with me. The thought of parting from her couldn't even completely form in my mind before I shut it down.

“Why? Why what?”

She reached up one small hand, trembling to give my bearded face a tentative touch, stroking gently when I didn't stop her. I tilted my head and sighed as I soaked up her touch. “Why didn't you find a woman after you were set free?” For some reason, I liked the way she phrased her question. It did feel like I'd been set free, and not in just the literal sense. Because I was very much afraid that kiss had been the thing to truly set me free.

So I gave her the most honest answer I had. It wasn't something I'd thought about or even really acknowledged to myself, but the second I uttered the words, I knew they were true. “Because they wouldn't have been you, Pippa.”

“But we've never met.”

“Knuckles showed me your picture. I think the one he gave me when he told me to find you was the last picture your mother sent him.” I fished it out of the pocket of my inner shirt and handed it to her. It wasn't the one of her tied up and terrified. It was one where she was staring off into the distance with a soft smile on her face.

“I don't understand.” She smiled up at me, obviously confused but not concerned.

“I fell in love with the woman in that picture, Pippa.” I looked at her helplessly, unable to give her anything but the strict truth. “From that moment, there was never going to be another woman for me.” I thought I might have scared her, but her grip on my shirt tightened and she clutched me closer to her.

“Gunnar...”

“Look,” I said roughly, “I need you to understand something. I may not have experience in anything to do with women, but I know what I want. And what I want is you. Not just because of my promise to Knuckles, but because I’m drawn to you in a way I can’t explain. I want to protect you, care for you. I want what my mom and dad have together, and I want it with you. But only if you want me too.”

Pippa bit her lip, looking uncertain but interested. “Maybe... What if we did that?” She picked at my shirt with one hand while still clutching one small fist in the material.

“Did what, honey?”

“You know. If we decided to be a couple. You’re right that I need rest and to get settled. Go to therapy and see if I can get medicated to the nines or something. But you’re right. There is a definite connection between us. And...” She trailed off, glancing away from me.

“What is it, honey? Don’t be afraid to tell me what you’re thinkin’ or feelin’. ‘Cause I’m shit at readin’ women.” My attempt at humor wasn’t great.

“Gunnar, I don’t... I don’t want you to leave me alone.” Her voice was a mere thread of sound. Had I not been so close to her and staring at her lips, I probably wouldn’t have known what she said.

“No one said I was goin’ anywhere, Pippa. Truth is, I feel better when I can at least see you. I’d prefer to be within arm’s reach.” We stared at each other for a very long time. There was so much to say but I’m not sure either of us knew where to start. I liked the fact she wanted me close. “Whether or not you agree to my claim, I won’t leave you unless you tell me to go. Even then, you might not see me and I won’t

interfere with your life, but I'll always be watching over you." When she opened her mouth to say something, I plowed on. "Not because of anything Knuckles wanted me to do. Because you're it for me."

The relief in Pippa's eyes was immediate, and she actually sagged against me. "Good." She patted my chest. "That's good. Glad we got that straight."

I tightened my arms around her, tucking her head under my chin. "Yeah, honey. I'm glad we got that straight too."

Pippa trembled slightly in my arms, whether from exhaustion or emotion I wasn't sure. I held her close, savoring the warmth of her body against mine. After a few moments, I reluctantly pulled back.

"As much as I'd like to stay like this, you need to get dressed and eat something," I said gently. "Then we can work on your hair and get you into bed for some real rest."

She nodded, looking a bit dazed. "You're right. I'm just... I don't want to let go yet."

"I know, honey. I don't either. But you need to get dressed." Then something occurred to me. "Are you steady enough to dress? Do you need me to... I don't know... help?"

She smiled again, rubbing her hand up and down the left side of my chest. Over my heart. "I think I can manage myself. Thank you for offering, though."

I sighed, feeling something I hadn't experienced in a very, very long time. I was content. I'd saved this woman. Gotten her out of danger and brought her to the place that had once been my home. She was looking to me for comfort and security. Pippa wasn't mine yet, but it wouldn't take long for her to be all in with me. Hell, maybe she was already. I didn't know enough about women to know. But even now, she still

clung to me.

I leaned in and brushed one more soft kiss to her lips. Stopping myself from going further was harder than I'd thought. Now that I'd experienced kissing Pippa, I wanted to do it more.

Pippa nestled closer to me, her body relaxing against mine. I could feel her exhaustion in the way she leaned heavily into my embrace. As much as I wanted to keep holding her, I knew she needed rest more than anything.

"Get dressed, honey. Then we'll get some food into you."

Pippa took a deep breath and nodded again. Her eyes were pleasantly glazed as I lifted my head from hers. "OK, I can do that."

Reluctantly, I pulled away from her. Her lower lip trembled and she whimpered softly, but nodded her head. I left her there but leaving her alone went against everything inside me. I needed to comfort her. To help her. To be there for her in case she needed me for anything. But she needed privacy. Not a strange man looking at her naked body, lusting after her.

Once outside the bathroom, I leaned against the door as I shut it. The door between us felt like prison walls and I hated it on principle. Sure, I could open it and go to her, but she needed to know I'd do anything for her, even if it was hard. At least, that's what I hoped she took away from this, because if that's not what I was giving her, I had no idea why I was denying us both what we wanted.

I took a breath. No. This was what my dad would do. It's what my brothers would do.

Instead of vacillating on whether or not I was doing the right thing, I looked at my phone and pulled up the number Knuckles had given me. Mama had confirmed that,

if she'd been raped, it wasn't recent and there were no physical signs. She wasn't pregnant. The STD testing was still pending. I saw some bruising on her torso and one side of her face was discolored, but considering where she was and what they'd wanted her for, she was Goddamned lucky.

I sent off a text. I'd actually spoken to Knuckles when I'd called the last time, so even though he was still in prison, I knew he had a simple burner phone smuggled into his cell. Which didn't really surprise me. Knuckles was nothing if not resourceful.

The text was brief, giving the bare details. The last thing I wanted to do was to set off any red flags on some super secret government server and have the feds come after me. If he wanted more, he could contact me.

The door opened as I hit send. Immediately, my attention was focused on Pippa. I straightened, tucking the phone back into my pocket.

"Knuckles wanted a detailed list of your injuries. I didn't talk to Mama, but other than being knocked around, I didn't see anything major in the brief glance I got." I tried to smile at her, but at the moment, she was so exhausted, the bruise on her cheek stood out like an accusation.

"I'm sore and stiff, but I suspect that's more from inactivity. My injuries are more mental than physical, I think. I'm OK." She didn't meet my gaze, and her lower lip trembled.

"Yeah, baby. You're nowhere near OK."

Pippa's eyes welled up with tears at my words. She bit her lip, clearly trying to hold back the flood of emotions. I stepped closer and gently cupped her face in my hands.

"You don't have to be strong right now. You can let it out if you need to."

She shook her head, blinking rapidly. “I can’t. If I start crying now, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop and we’re not at a stopping point. We’re still going to that other place. Right?”

“Kiss of Death?” When she nodded, I did too. “Yeah. I wanted to head out tonight after Mama checked you over, but that was for my own benefit. You need rest more than I need to avoid my father.”

“I can sleep on the way.”

I reached out to her and brushed my thumb gently over her bruised cheek. “Yeah. You could. But you’re not goin’ to. At least, not in place of proper sleep. You’ve been through a lot. Sleepin’ in a strange place is gonna be hard enough without tryin’ to sleep in a vehicle. And we both know that Humvee ain’t the most comfortable ride.”

My attempt at humor fell flat. She gazed up at me, tears swimming in her eyes. One of the offending drops of poison spilled from the corner and down her cheek. She said she didn’t want to cry, but I thought a breakdown might be a relief once she started. But, shit. What the fuck did I know?

“You’re right, Gunnar. I’m not OK.” Her voice cracked on the last word, and she swayed slightly on her feet.

I immediately stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close. She buried her face against my chest and let out a shuddering breath but still didn’t let go of all the grief and pain. Pippa held back as much of the crying as she could and other than the occasional shuddering breath in, she didn’t make a sound.

“It’s all right, honey. You don’t have to be OK right now,” I murmured, running my hand soothingly up and down her back. “You’ve been through hell.”

She nodded against me but didn't speak. I could feel her trembling and knew she was fighting to hold herself together. Part of me wanted to tell her to let it out, to cry and scream if she needed to. But I also understood her need to stay in control, at least for now.

It took a while. I was afraid to move, not wanting her to think I was rushing her. I was willing to do whatever it took to help her feel better. When she finally pulled back, her eyes were red-rimmed and tears streaked her cheeks. She wasn't nearly done, but she'd released all she could for now.

After a long moment, I leaned in and kissed her again. One long, soft, lingering kiss meant to comfort instead of arouse. But fuck me, it was arousing as hell. Her lips were soft and trembling. I could taste the salt of her tears and longed to kiss every inch of her face to remove any lingering moisture. There should never be a reason for Pippa to cry. Ever.

I pulled back and watched her face carefully. Her eyes opened slowly. There was a dreamy expression on her face that made her even more beautiful than I'd first thought. Instead of telling her that and risking sounding like a complete idiot, I smiled gently at her.

"You think you can eat while I work through your hair?"

"I still don't think you can manage it. It'll be easier to just cut it." She didn't really want to cut her hair. I could see that plainly. I thought that maybe she didn't want to have hope only to have it ripped away from her. That's when I realized there might be more going on with her than I'd first realized.

"Easier isn't always better." I had to be careful. Phrase my words carefully. "I'm sure I'll hit a few snags. It might hurt a bit. But I think it's worth taking a chance to fix it, rather than cut it."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. “You really want to try?” She was guarding her words as much as I was, so I decided to take the first leap.

“I do, Pippa. I meant what I said when I told you about Knuckles. Yes, he asked me to make you my old lady and give you the protection of my name and my club, but if I’d met you on my own, even not knowing you were Knuckles’ daughter, I’d have done everything in my power to make you mine.” More tears filled her eyes, spilling over and sliding down her face. “I know I must sound creepy as fuck to you, but I can’t sugarcoat it and tell you I’m gonna be your fairy tale prince. That ain’t me.”

Pippa set out a small giggle even as another tear fell. “You don’t sound creepy, Gunnar.” She reached up and touched my lower lip with her fingers. “You sound just about perfect to me.”

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Pippa

Supper consisted of the yummiest hamburgers and hotdogs I'd ever tasted. The burgers were juicy with just a hint of smoke taste from the charcoal grill, and the dogs were just this side of burnt. Delicious ! Sure, there were other things, but the burgers and dogs were my main concern. I ate three. Of each. Now I was so sleepy I could barely hold my head up while Gunnar continued to work on my hair.

"Almost finished, baby," he murmured as he continued to pick at a few of the tangles. He'd only had to cut out a couple of very stubborn knots he couldn't get out. Just a few strands here and there. I'd call it a win, but I was just too tired to celebrate.

"Yay..." My gratitude was great, but my enthusiasm was somewhat lessened. Not for lack of trying. I was dead where I sat.

His warm chuckle filled me with contentment. How had this man sucked me in so completely? I'd been in his company a few hours -- not counting sleeping off the drugs I'd been full of -- and I already couldn't imagine my life without him. "The best part is, your hair will be completely dry by the time I'm done. You can go to sleep without a wet head."

"Yay..."

We were sitting on the bed in the back bedroom Mama and Pops had given us to clean up and rest in. Gunnar was at my back with one leg bent beside me, the other hanging off the side. It probably would have been more comfortable if he'd had both legs on the bed and me between them, but he was taking great pains to not pin me in.

I was more grateful to him for recognizing I might be a little claustrophobic. I had my knees tucked under my chin with my arms wrapped around my legs. My eyes were closed, and I was drifting as Gunnar made pass after gentle pass with the brush over my hair.

He chuckled, leaning in to kiss my cheek before whispering, “You think you can sleep now if you lie down?”

“Yes. Would you mind staying with me for a while? Maybe hold me or something?”

He paused before setting the brush aside on the nightstand. I thought he might be going to refuse me. After all, he was supposed to be talking with his mother and sister. Then he urged me to lie down and, to my surprise and more relief than I should have been comfortable with, wrapped his muscled, tattooed arms around me in a warm, soothing embrace. “I’ll stay with you as long as you fuckin’ want, baby.” I loved the gruff tone of voice. He sounded like he might be as emotional as I was.

I wrapped my fingers around one of his forearms where they crossed in front of me, holding me to him. He grunted once. The second I settled, I took a deep breath... and I was out.

* * *

I woke to voices in the distance. I thought there was tension in the conversation and I gasped, sitting upright and scooting back until I felt the wall at my back. Only, the wall had some give to it. Not much, but it felt off. Besides, there was something in the back of my mind telling me to calm the fuck down. That’s when I realized I was actually in a bed, and nothing stank like dirty feet and excrement.

I took several deep breaths, trying to get my heart rate under control. The spike of adrenaline left me shaky and out of sorts, but everything came back to me in a rush. I

was safe. One of the voices outside the bedroom was Gunnar's. There was more than one woman's voice talking over each other and one was now sobbing uncontrollably.

I was dressed in a pair of soft cotton pants and a T-shirt. Since I had no idea who else was out there, I took time to find the items Angel had brought for me and dug through them until I found a cotton sports bra. I slipped it on before putting the shirt back on, then opened the door carefully.

Our room was at the end of the hall. To get to the living room, I had to turn a corner that led out of the hallway. Instead, I stood at the corner and listened.

"But you don't understand, Mom! This is all my fault!"

"Hannah, you're not thinking straight." I recognized Angel's voice and heard the tears when she spoke. "None of what happened was your fault."

"But it was! It was! Gunnar, I'm so sorry!" I heard Gunnar grunt and Hannah's sobs were muffled. She was likely hugging him.

"NO, Hannah!" Her mother snapped and I peeked 'round the corner. Gunnar had his arms around his sister and Angel stood with them, forcing Hannah's face up so Angel could look into her eyes as she spoke. "I know what happened. I know Gunnar protected you. He made a choice. Don't dishonor that sacrifice with regret."

"Gunnar lost fifteen years of his life because of me, Mom!"

"No, he didn't." I stepped around the corner, my attention focused on the two women, but I couldn't help a glance at Gunnar. He looked like he was helpless in the wake of his sister's tears. I seemed to remember a similar look when I was a hair's breadth from my breaking point.

Hannah turned her face away from me and into her brother's chest while she hastily wiped at her face with the sleeve of her shirt. It took her a couple of seconds, but she heaved in a shuddering breath, then turned to me. "He spent fifteen years in hell when he should have been living his dream. He was going into the military so he could be part of ExFil with Dad and my other brothers. Because he's a convicted felon, Dad can't hire him and Gunnar can't help Dad run the place when Dad finally retires. Everyone lost out. Because of me."

"Sometimes life throws a kink in your plans." I didn't want to make light of Hannah's feelings, but I had a very different opinion of Gunnar's sacrifice. "If Gunnar hadn't gone to prison and met my dad, I'd be wishing I was dead right about now. I hate that Gunnar had to go through what he did, but while he was there several things happened to change the course of both our lives. Mine for the better. His? I don't know. But if he hadn't met my dad, hadn't learned how to fight dirty and relentlessly, I wouldn't be sitting here today. I'd have been sold to the highest bidder and probably killed shortly thereafter once they realized they couldn't control me with drugs."

"So, as much as I would never want anyone who didn't deserve to be there to go to prison, I'm glad Gunnar is the man he is. And that man took a prison sentence for his beloved sister so she could have the life he thought she should have. I suppose, in a way, he sacrificed himself for both of us. Thank him. Love him. But let him have the credit for his sacrifice."

There was silence in the room. Then someone to my left sniffled. Then Angel let out a small sob. Then it was on. Snotfest of epic proportions. Turned out, Mama was the one who let loose that critical sniff. She soon pulled all of us into a circle and everyone had a good cry before we all laughed.

Gunnar hugged his sister for a long time. They spoke softly to each other while Angel and Mama fussed over me.

“You should still be asleep, child.” Mama brought me a glass of water and I smiled as I took it from her. Pops appeared behind her with a tray of cheese and crackers. He looked disgruntled, but winked at me as he set the tray down. “You couldn’t possibly have rested enough.”

I caught Gunnar’s look and shrugged. “Once I metabolized the rest of the drugs, I felt much better. And to be perfectly honest, the bath did me more good than anything. Gunnar was even able to get most of the knots out of my hair.” I tugged at one curl gently as if to illustrate my point.

“He was always good at getting out tangles.” Hannah gave me a watery smile. “I’m sorry if it seemed like I was making light of your situation.”

I shook my head. “I never thought that. Not at all. I have a different take on the situation and hoped it might bring you some comfort to know I owe him my life. You too. If you hadn’t let him take charge, I would never have met Gunnar. He’ll have to decide if I was worth the years he spent on the inside with my dad, but I intend to never make him regret doing what his instinct demanded of him. And that was protecting his sister.”

Hannah hugged me close and whispered next to my ear. “Take care of my big brother.”

“I will.”

When we parted, Hannah smiled and wiped her eyes again. “Are you waiting on Dad to get here?” She spoke to Gunnar, who had been talking to Pops. The two men shook hands, clapping each other on the shoulders.

“No,” Gunnar said. “If Pippa’s rested enough, I want to get on the road. I’d like to reach Nashville before daylight.”

“Why the hurry?” Angel was back to wringing her hands. It was obvious she wasn’t comfortable with Gunnar leaving. Not yet.

“Because, like it or not, there could be half a club full of angry bikers ridin’ for my head. I told Ice and Cyclone I had no intention of letting this touch Bones, and I meant it.” As if on cue, the men in question entered the house.

“Christ on a crutch,” Mama swore under her breath. “Angel, did you not raise these boys to know it’s rude to enter someone’s home uninvited?”

“She did, Mama.” Ice continued into the house without so much as pausing. Cyclone closed the door behind them and both brothers went to Gunnar, enveloping him in what was probably an embarrassing hug, but it didn’t seem like any of the men cared. This was two older brothers welcoming home a brother they thought was lost to them.

Hannah openly wept while Angel hugged her close. Mama put her arm around me and I started. The older woman raised an eyebrow and I smiled back at her.

“You’re a remarkable woman, Pippa.” Mama kept her voice soft, for us alone. “You’re the perfect woman for Gunnar. You’re what he needs in more than one way. I have a feeling that, unless you curb him, that one is going to live his life to please you and fuck everything and everyone else. You’re either going to need to rein him in, or let him run amok, in which case he will eventually take over your life.”

I shrugged. “He will anyway. It’s what overprotective cavemen do. Besides, he would never take over my life to control me, but to keep me safe and happy. And how do I know this?”

Before I could answer, Mama waved me off. “Pfft. You know it because you’ve been paying attention to the man who’s had you in his care.”

“He’s done nothing but what he thought was best for me, Mama. I don’t think he wanted to come here at all, but was afraid I was hurt worse than he could tell.”

“I know it was.” Pops moved to Mama’s side and put an arm around the older woman. “That’s who Gunnar is. He has more of his father in him than either of them will admit. At least in public.”

“Did they have a strained relationship before everything happened with Hannah?”

“They butted heads from time to time, but that’s just because they’re so similar. I think Gunnar needed to get away from Cain so his father didn’t smother his personality. Gunnar is too much of an alpha to roll over. It’s hard for an alpha father to let his own alpha son be his own man when he raises the kid.”

“I’m sure there could have been a better alternative than prison.” Mama slapped at Pops’ chest, a gentle chastisement. “He was going to the Marines. They would have straightened him out.”

Pops turned to Mama then. “Really. Do you honestly think the damage wouldn’t already have been done? One of two things would have happened. He and Cain would have come to blows, or Gunnar would have submitted out of respect for his father and been a shadow of the man he is now.”

“Dramatic much?” Mama raised an eyebrow.

Pops crossed his arms over his chest in a belligerent stance. “You tell me I’m wrong, I’ll admit to being a drama queen.”

Mama grumbled. “Shut up.” Yeah. She knew Pops was right.

It wasn’t long after the guys broke it up. They continued to razz each other and do

that strange male bonding thing all men seem to delight in. I watched intently for my own reasons. I could see the force of personality Gunnar had. I hadn't noticed before, because I'd been too focused on merely surviving, but if I had to judge the three of them, there was no doubt in my mind Gunnar was the natural alpha. It was in the way he took charge of me in that awful place where he'd found me. And how he did the same with his brothers when he first arrived with me at this place. Now, though they hadn't seen him out in the wild in more than a decade, it almost seemed like the president and vice president of Bones deferred to Gunnar. It was subtle, to be sure, but I could see it.

"She gets it," Pops said, nudging Mama. I glanced at them to find the couple smiling at me.

"Of course she does." Mama sniffed. "That boy would never pick a woman who wasn't intelligent."

"It's not about how smart I am. That man's a predator. And not just any predator. He's an apex predator. There might be men who could fight him, but I don't think there are many who could best him."

"I'm impressed." Mama didn't look impressed. She looked wary. Which was odd.

I checked Pops, then went back to Mama. While Pops was relaxed, he still watched me intently. "What?"

"You have training?" Mama tilted her head. "Because you were very specific in your description. That's a lot for someone to pick up in no more time than you've been together, especially when you were at least partially messed up from the drugs you'd been given when he first found you."

"I was going to school to be a zoologist and to study sociology in animals. I'm

literally trained to recognize social traits in animals, including identifying the alpha.”

“You couldn’t be that trained.” Mama shook her head, frowning slightly. “You haven’t been out of high school that long.”

I huffed out an exasperated breath, rolling my eyes. “I took college courses in high school and was fortunate enough to go to a high school with a veterinary pathway. My senior year, I took night classes. Plus, I got in a full semester before this happy horseshit happened. So I’m greener than goose shit, but recognizing an apex predator for me would be like you recognizing a lethal heart rhythm. It’s pretty basic stuff in the field.”

Pops barked out a laugh before sitting down on the couch, his stout body shaking with humor. When everyone stopped to look at him, he guffawed outright, wiping tears from his eyes as they streamed down his cheeks.

“I don’t see anything so very Goddamned funny.” Mama crossed her arms over her chest, looking for all the world like a pissed-off cat.

“She got you that time but good, Mama. You don’t admit it, I’ll call you a liar in every language I know.”

“You don’t speak anything other than English!” Mama barked at him. Had she used that tone of voice with me, I’d probably have scurried away and hid.

Pops just shrugged. “Stupid smart phone has a translator on it. I’m sure I can fumble through several different languages.”

Mama finally gave up trying to look stern and gave a small chuckle as she shook her head. “Fuck all y’all.”

“Well, what do you expect when you automatically jump to conclusions about someone?” Pops still wiped tears from his eyes and occasionally shook with quiet laughter, but his declaration was clearly a point of contention between the couple.

“It’s happened before! I’d rather piss someone off and apologize later than get caught with our pants down.”

“Christ.” Ice scrubbed a hand over his face. “You thought she’d infiltrated the club. What? Did you think she was CIA again?”

“The woman is scarily good at profiling. At least, she’s got your brother pegged better than me or Pops ever could.”

Gunnar’s gaze shifted to me. “You do?”

I shook my head, not liking the attention focused so completely on me. “I know animals. You just reminded me of some traits of animals at the top of the food chain.”

“Humans are at the top of the food chain.” Gunnar waved me off but didn’t dismiss me outright.

I studied him for several seconds, trying to figure out his angle. “You want to know what my response to that statement is?” I raised my eyebrows. “Fine. No. Humans aren’t at the top of the food chain. At least not with all things being equal. Technology allows us to be at the top. Technology we invented but have become so dependent on we can’t survive without it. You take a small group of people and put them in the wild. Even give them decent shelter, but make them go without any sort of technology, and they might last a short while, but the environment will get them every time. And that’s not with a big cat hunting them. There aren’t many people who can survive on their own in the wild for long. Maybe a few months. Maybe as long as a year. The skills to do that are no longer bred into us.” I lifted my chin at

him. “That’s your answer. The more feral a person is, the farther up the food chain he goes.”

Gunnar cocked his head, amusement on his face. “You sayin’ I’m feral?”

“Tell me you didn’t feel feral at times when you were in prison, and I’ll take it back.”

That got his attention. He glanced from me to Mama and back. “All right. I see your point. She is good.” He grinned. “Ought to make life interesting.”

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Gunnar

Surprisingly, my father didn't make an appearance before me and Pippa took off with Chains and Hawk. I sat in the back with Pippa and she'd leaned against my shoulder and slept most of the two-and-a-half-hour drive. If the situation had been different, I'd have loved to have made this ride with Pippa on the back of my bike. You know. If I had a bike. Something I'd have to make a top priority if I was gonna live in an active MC.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when we rolled into the Kiss of Death compound. I had no idea how the club had acquired this area or how much land and construction it owned, but the compound consisted of fenced-in city blocks. Multiple blocks. Nothing but three-story warehouses occupied the spaces. Not in neat rows to maximize the space, but set up seemingly at random. Each building looked exactly alike, though each building had a different purpose. You couldn't tell from the outside what was on the inside. From what I could tell, Torpedo ran a tight ship. There wasn't a vehicle outside on the paths or in any kind of parking lot not under cover. Even the paths were camouflaged from above. Once someone entered the compound, it was impossible to see where they went, even from the air.

Hawk wound his way under the fixed camouflage netting, the Humvee barely fitting between some of the buildings. He drove the vehicle like he'd driven this same route a million times, never hesitating when I just knew he was going to take off a mirror or get a wheel wedged at a corner.

"Fuck," I grumbled. "I only had my driver's license like three months before I went to prison."

Hawk barked out a laugh. Chains raised an eyebrow at Hawk but said nothing. “Don’t worry, kid. I’ll give you a crash course, so to speak.”

“You know, I’m not afraid to go back to prison.”

“And miss your honey? I don’t think so. I’ll take my chances today. Tomorrow might be another story.”

“Fucker,” I muttered under my breath. And yeah, those two bastards heard me. Even Chains snorted this time.

“I never learned to drive,” Pippa offered, lifting her chin. If I hadn’t already been in love with the woman, I’d have fallen then.

I leaned in on impulse and gently nipped her earlobe. “Remind me to tell you what you just did to me when we’re alone.”

Pippa sucked in a breath, her gaze snapping to mine. Her vivid green eyes were wide with shock and hunger. I wasn’t experienced in sex, but I knew what the look she was giving me meant. “Oh?”

Instead of saying anything else, I tightened my hold on her, needing to wrap her up in as much protection as I could. Not because I didn’t trust the men riding with me. Because I was a jealous bastard, now that I had the woman I wanted. It wasn’t something I’d ever known about myself, but there was no denying the monster inside me. Pippa had caught Chains’s and Hawk’s attention and I found I didn’t like their interest in the woman in my arms.

“Calm down, you jealous bastard.” Hawk chuckled. “We ain’t gonna make a move on your girl.” Then he addressed Pippa. “He don’t treat you right, though, you come runnin’ to one of us. We’ll put the asshole on the straight and narrow.”

Pippa looked up at me, curling her lips in to keep from smiling too much. Which she failed at miserably. “I don’t think I’ll have anything to worry about,” she said, finally giving up and giving me a dazzling smile. “Besides, I’m fully capable of making sure he treats me right.”

“Yep,” I growled. “Gonna have to have a long talk with you when we get inside our room.”

“Can you guys at least wait to get mushy until Bohannon assigns you a fuckin’ room?” Chains sounded put out, but he was fighting another grin.

“Nope,” I quipped. “Sure can’t.”

I leaned in and took Pippa’s lips with mine, thrusting my tongue inside her mouth once before pulling back. Her smile was glorious before she buried her face in my chest demurely. Kissing was as far as I’d ever go where someone might see, but I really liked staking that claim. Even if it was only two of the club members. Putting a claim on Pippa was the most satisfying thing I’d ever experienced to this point in my life.

“Honestly, Chains. It’s like you do it on purpose.” Hawk kept driving until he pulled into one particularly large warehouse. The door was easily wide enough for two semitrailers to back in side by side.

Once we rolled in, the doors shut behind us and we all climbed out of the cage. Bohannon and Torpedo both moved to me with identical grins on their faces. “Good to see you made it, kid. Everything go according to plan?”

I nodded. “That place was evil, Torpedo. We got Pippa out and killed anyone inside or on the grounds. When the other half of Fire and Steel gets back to their clubhouse, they’re gonna go hunting.”

“Ice and Cyclone know the score?”

I nodded. “Yep. We tried to drop any breadcrumbs we could going away from Bones. If they decide to go hunting, they’ll come here. Not to Bones.”

“Good. I got Data involved. He and Knight are working together on this. Between the two of them, we’ll have plenty of heads-up before those guys show up.”

“Torpedo. Bohannon. This is Pippa. Her dad was my cell mate. He might contact you guys at some point. If he does, I’d appreciate you letting me know.”

Bohannon glanced at Torpedo before speaking. “There a problem?”

“Not at all. But Knuckles, a convicted killer who, by his own admission, killed the men who raped and murdered his sister, told me to rescue his only daughter and make her my old lady. Last thing I’m gonna do is not follow up on any call he makes in case he thinks I’m avoiding him. The man will put a hit out on me if he thinks I’m trying to keep him from contacting his daughter to confirm my treatment of her. I ain’t too ashamed to admit I’m scared as shit of the man.”

Pippa chuckled before putting her face against my shoulder but continued to laugh. The other guys laughed outright, and I found I’d missed this so fucking much. The comradery. The ribbing. The brotherhood I’d never found anywhere else in my life. Not even when I played sports in high school. My gaze met Bohannon who was grinning like a loon. He nodded at me, reaching out to give me a firm handshake. “We got your back, brother.”

Everyone else followed suit. Three of the guys I knew from Bones. I figured they’d followed Torpedo and Bohannon, probably to help get things set up around guys everyone was familiar with until they knew they had guys here they could trust. There were a couple from Salvation’s Bane as well. Mostly, there were guys I hadn’t

met before. Most of those had rap sheets as long as my arm. And all of them were men I recognized as being loyal to Knuckles. How did I know this? That same tattoo in the webbing of their thumb and forefinger I had. To a man, everyone who had that tattoo gave me respectful nods.

Bohannon's wife, Luna, took us to the top floor of the warehouse we were in. The place had been converted into an open plan apartment. "All four of my sons are with Kiss of Death now." I thought that was as much for me as it was for Pippa. "They're looking forward to seeing Gunnar again and meeting you. Probably wanting to meet you more than they want to see that one." Luna gave me a little smirk. "For now, think of it as the presidential suite," she said with a cheeky grin. "Only special people get to stay here. Mainly because the guys think it's too comfortable. Somehow, it makes them less manly to have a place this big. They own enough of these warehouses to make everyone a top floor flat, but the guys are holding out. I think they're taking bets on who gives in first."

"It's that pesky Y chromosome. Does something to them." Pippa winked at me, and I'd never been so happy to see a woman flirt with me. She should be scared and fragile. Instead, once she'd slept off the lingering effects of the drug she'd had forced on her, she didn't seem worse for wear. Which set off all kinds of alarms, but I had bigger problems right now -- because Luna said her goodbyes and shut the door and that left me in this place alone with Pippa.

Speaking of Pippa. She stepped into my personal space and put her arms around my neck. She didn't kiss me or do anything other than cling to me, pressing her body against mine. Of course, my arms went around her as if I had no control over them.

I had no idea how long I stood there with her, but I had no desire to move. As long as Pippa was in my arms, I could stay close to her. I could protect and cherish her. Maybe it was because I'd been in prison so long, away from human affection. Yeah, I got to see my mother and father and occasionally Hannah or Mama and Pops, but we

weren't allowed to touch, and until I'd held Pippa in my arms when I carried her out of hell, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed affectionate physical touch.

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes, and I felt like the biggest fucking asshole in the world. Here she was, hurting, and I was losing myself in the feel of her sweet body pressed against me.

"Fuck," I swore as I used one hand to gently sweep away her tears with my thumb. "I'm sorry, Pippa. You're hurting and I'm..."

She reached up and put her trembling fingers over my mouth to hush me. "I think we're both hurting. I also think it's time to start healing."

"Tell me what to do, Pippa. I'm gonna need some help here." I'd never been more serious in my life. I was totally out of my depth.

"Kiss me, Gunnar. Then, just do what feels good because I'm out of my depth, too."

That was a tall order, but I couldn't argue. People had been doing this as long as there had been people. I knew the basics. I'd figure it the fuck out. But that wasn't as much a concern as her well-being. "Are you sure about this, Pippa? We don't have to have sex now. Or at all, if you don't want to. I can hold you while you sleep. I can pleasure you. Whatever you need."

"I want you, Gunnar. Please. Kiss me. We'll decide what happens after that together."

Maybe it made me a deplorable human being, but a fifteen-year prison sentence said I wasn't a fucking saint. Kissing Pippa was easy. My mouth claimed hers, tongue sliding into her mouth like it belonged there. God, did it feel good! Like coming home after a long time away. Maybe that was what Pippa meant. Like I'd found something that completed me.

Pippa tilted her head, inviting me deeper, and I took what she gave me. My hands slid down her sides, cupping her ass before pulling her against my hard cock. The sound that came from my throat wasn't human, but Pippa didn't pull away. In fact, she moaned into my kiss and pressed herself against me harder.

"Bedroom," I said, more to myself than to Pippa when I finally pulled back enough to breathe without gasping. She nodded and led me over to the door on the far side of the room with a room key dangling from a hook on the wall beside it.

I picked her up without thinking, Pippa giggled and wrapped her legs around my waist as I carried her into the room and onto the queen-size bed along one wall of the corner space. The sheets were soft, clean with only one pillow on the bed. I should probably have been embarrassed at how my cock stretched the shorts I was still wearing, but fuck it. I had my woman in my arms about to claim her. She was letting me, and she'd be the only woman I'd ever be with.

When I was a teenager, before my life had gone to hell, I'd looked at the men in Bones and watched them interact with the club whores in the clubhouse. Anyone not married or in a relationship -- men and women alike -- took their pleasures frequently and with whomever they wanted as long as the woman was willing and everyone was single. I hadn't had that opportunity and, thanks to Knuckles, had been able to avoid sex in prison. I thought I'd never be in a sexual situation with a woman for a number of reasons. Even once my time was served, what man wanted to admit to any woman he was getting ready to fuck he was a virgin? I'd decided I'd lived without it during my prime years, I could manage going forward.

Pippa let me go and moved to the center of the bed, shrugging out of her shirt and pants before rolling onto her side to watch me strip off my clothes. I'd never been completely naked in front of a woman before and I'd never been so nervous in my life. The thought of showing every inch of my body to this woman made my heart race and my breath catch in my throat, and I wasn't sure how much was anticipation

and how much was dread. If she found me lacking, I knew I'd never recover.

Pippa tracked my every movement, her attention completely focused on me. I saw her body shimmer in the lights as sweat coated her skin. The bruising on her body stood out in stark relief and I paused in undressing.

“Are you sure you're ready for this? Much as I want you right now, I absolutely will not risk hurtin' you, Pippa. Not for any reason.”

I swallowed as she moved to the edge of the bed, her knees bent so she sat back on her heels. Without a word, she pulled her bra over her head, revealing the most beautiful breasts I'd ever seen. I figured I'd seen more than my fair share in smuggled-in magazines, but Pippa was absolutely exquisite. Her breasts were small and tipped with dusky nipples my mouth watered to taste. I simply to God couldn't take my focus from her to finish shedding my clothes.

“I've kissed a couple guys,” Pippa said in a soft voice. “But I've never been naked in front of one.”

I scrubbed my hand over my mouth. “I've never been naked in front of a woman.”

“So, another first for both of us?”

“Gonna be a lot of firsts.” I let out a nervous laugh as I reached for her.

Pippa pulled me to her and kissed me until instinct took over and I took the lead. Do what feels good? I could definitely do that.

As Pippa's soft lips parted under mine, I took that as my permission to explore her mouth with my tongue, tasting her sweetness. I didn't even try to fight the groan bubbling up from my throat. I'd have been embarrassed, but Pippa's soft moan

mingled with mine. Any reasons I thought I had for hiding my reactions from her became unimportant. She deserved to know how wonderful she made me feel.

I trailed my hands over her smooth flesh, relishing the sensation of silky skin against my roughened palms. She was so warm, so alive against me, it was intoxicating. I pulled her closer, needing her tight against me, her breasts mashed against my chest. Pippa responded by arching against me, her breasts rising and falling with each ragged breath.

I moved lower, trailing kisses down her neck and shoulders before taking the top of one breast in my mouth. I sucked, shuddering in pleasure when she cried out and thrust her chest toward me again. She tunneled her fingers through my hair and held me to her. The harder I sucked, the better she seemed to like it.

“Gunnar.” Her soft gasp sent pleasure through me. My cock was hard as granite and I knew there was no way I would last very long.

“I’m gonna do everything I can to make you come, Pippa. But, please don’t hold it against me if I can’t. I promise you I’ll figure it out.”

She let out a small laugh. “I don’t think you’ll have to do much. I’m wound so tight I’m pretty sure a stiff breeze would set me off.”

“Don’t I know the fuckin’ feelin’.”

My hands shook as I continued to move down her body. My lips followed my fingers as I kissed my way down her beautiful body. I marveled at her sweet scent, at the salty taste of the sweat glistening on her skin. With every sigh or sharp inhalation Pippa made, my cock pulsed even harder.

When I reached the hem of her panties, I took in a shuddering breath. With trembling

fingers, I pulled them over her slim hips and down her long legs until I slipped them from her feet and tossed them to the floor beside the bed. My heart thundered in my chest as I took in the sight of her perfect pussy -- smooth, pink, and inviting.

Pippa's eyes were lowered but she watched me intently as I dipped my head to taste her for the first time. We both seemed to hold our breath until the second my lips grazed her glistening sex. Her clit pulsed under my tongue as I lapped gently.

The taste hit me like a punch. I actually grunted as her flavor exploded on my tongue in a tangy, musky zest. I grunted at the same time Pippa cried out in surprise.

“Holy fuck!” She leaned up on her elbows. “Don’t you dare fuckin’ stop!”

With a growl, I fastened my mouth on her pussy and licked and sucked while she writhed underneath me, grinding her cunt against my face.

I wanted to put my fingers in her, to see how much more I could give her, but I wasn’t exactly sure if I should. I didn’t want to hurt her. As I brought my fingers to her pussy to circle her opening with my fingertips, Pippa’s breathing grew erratic and ragged.

“Gunnar! Oh, God!”

Her body tensed beneath me, then she thrashed her head from side to side as she screamed. Her pussy quivered beneath my lips and tongue as she came. I was so relieved I got lightheaded and thought I might have sobbed in relief.

When her body relaxed, so did her grip on my hair. I kissed her inner thigh and lapped softly at her folds. Sweat coated my body, and I actually trembled.

“Gunnar?” She found my shoulders with her hands and tried to pull me to her. I took

my time, kissing a blazing trail up her torso, between her breasts until I kissed her lips as I lay on top of her, my hips in the cradle of hers.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Pippa? I’m not strong enough to let you go once I have you.”

She smiled at me, stroking my beard with her fingers. “Were you planning on leaving me if we don’t have sex?”

I didn’t even hesitate. “Fuck no!”

Pippa’s laughter warmed my heart. After everything she’d been through, I had no idea how she could manage any sort of humor, but my woman wasn’t a shrinking violet. She was brave. Strong. Once she found her footing with me and wherever we landed after this, I knew she’d be a force to be reckoned with. “Yes, Gunnar. I’m sure this is what I want. I want you to make love to me.”

“Not sure I ever thought I’d actually make love with a woman. Always thought of it as just fuckin’, but I see the difference now.”

She smiled up at me. “Don’t make me wait any longer, Gunnar. I’m just as anxious as you are to do this.”

I nodded and took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart as I reached between us and fisted my cock to guide myself to Pippa’s entrance. The head of my cock brushed against her slick folds and we both gasped at the sensation. I froze. “I forgot a condom.”

“I’ve got an implant. Mama said all the tests she ran came back clean. There’s a couple pending, but she said...” Pippa’s face flushed pink. “My hymen’s intact,” she finished in a soft rush. “And I was pretty sure they hadn’t touched me like that before,

but she confirmed it.”

“I got tested when I got out on account of the ink. And I didn’t have sex.”

“Then if we’re doing this, let’s do it all the way.”

“Nothing between us?” I raised a questioning eyebrow.

She smiled up at me. “Nothing between us.”

“I’ll be as careful as I can. You tell me if I hurt you.”

“I don’t think anything could hurt right now.” Her eyes were glazed, and she looked like she was on the verge of another orgasm. Sweat dripped down her temple and also beaded on her upper lip. My own body shuddered occasionally as I shifted my weight. Anticipation was off the charts.

Bracing myself on my forearms, I slowly pushed forward, groaning as I sank into her tight heat. Her body enveloped me inch by inch. Pippa’s breath hitched and her fingers dug into my shoulders. I paused, giving her time to adjust, but the effort it took bordered on superhuman.

“You OK?” My voice was strained as I summoned every ounce of willpower I possessed to keep from shoving the rest of the way inside her.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Don’t stop!”

I pushed again, easing the rest of the way inside her. Her pussy squeezed me so tight I thought I might lose my Goddamn mind. I tried to give her as much time as she needed as I strained to hang on to my control. Which was fast slipping through my fingers like the finest sand.

When I was finally seated inside her, I shivered, wrapping my arms around her as tightly as I could, holding myself still inside her as deep as I could go.

“Sweet God, Pippa.” I buried my face in her neck. “You feel so fuckin’ amazing!” It was the truth. Pippa’s muscles clenched around me, milking my cock in the most incredible way. I had no idea how I hadn’t come yet, but I knew there was no way this was going to last longer than a couple of minutes. No fucking way.

“So do you.” Pippa shifted beneath me, urging me to move until we found a rhythm with each other.

I pulled back only to shove back inside her and she moved with me like we’d been doing this forever. Her body felt like a homecoming. As her moans and whimpers grew louder with each stroke, I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be. With this woman. Pleasuring her. Protecting her. It was like everything in my life suddenly clicked into place. I would not be the man she trusted so completely with her heart and body if I hadn’t gone through everything I had. She’d said as much before, but it hadn’t really penetrated until this one perfect moment.

The bed squeaked beneath us as we found our pace. The sharp crack of thunder outside only punctuated our lovemaking, turning it wild and primal. I thrust into Pippa over and over again, with ever harder strokes. But it wasn’t only me. Pippa planted her feet on my calves and lifted herself to meet me, crying out every time my body slammed into hers. She screamed my name, and her pussy contracted around my cock. The smell of sex in the air was something I’d always associate with this first time.

“I’m gonna come, Pippa. Tell me if you want me to pull out because I can’t do it unless you tell me to.” I thought that would be harder to admit, but not to Pippa. She already knew my flaws and accepted me. The least I could do was be honest with her and show her how much she affected me.

She dug her nails into my ass and pulled me to her. “Inside me,” she whispered. “Inside me.”

That was as long as I was capable of waiting. With a brutal roar, I emptied myself inside her sweet pussy. It made me a complete bastard, but I felt a sense of pride. Like I’d marked her for any other man to know she was mine. Then I collapsed on top of her.

As my breathing settled and my heart rate returned to normal, I nuzzled her neck and shoulder while she clung to me, her fingers once again in my hair as she held me to her.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft and drowsy. “That was so wonderful.”

“Yeah. So worth the fuckin’ wait. So fuckin’ worth everything ...”

I knew I needed to get up and help her clean herself or something. I definitely needed to pull out of her pussy, but I couldn’t seem to make myself. Instead, I settled myself on top of her, my dick still firmly inside her, not softening one bit. I took a breath...

And I was out.

Chapter Nin e

Pippa

“What the everlastin’ fuck, Gunnar?!”

I let out a surprised squeak as something removed the most wonderfully heavy, delicious-smelling weighted blanket from my body I’d ever had the pleasure of sleeping under. After such a long time in hell, the loss was traumatic and I whimpered my displeasure.

“Get the fuck off my daughter!” The enraged roar was followed by a punishing fight. I sat up in shock, pulling the covers over my naked body on instinct.

“Stop it!” I screamed at the two men, but no one was paying me any attention. I reached for my phone, unsure who I was planning on calling, when another man sauntered into the room like he owned the place.

“For Christ’s sake, Knuckles. What the fuck did you expect?” The other man didn’t attempt to pull Knuckles off Gunnar. Instead, he leaned against the wall... drinking a cup of coffee? I could smell it from here! My gaze locked on the lidded cup and it was on.

“I’ve not had coffee in... Ohmigod!” I jumped from the bed and in the direction of the older man standing there all cozy with a grin on his face like this was all a big fucking joke, when I was still half asleep and hadn’t had coffee in FOREVER! “Gimmie!”

“Oh, shit.” The guy with the coffee straightened and I wasn’t sure if he was trying to guard his coffee from me or hand it over, but he had both hands around his cup. All I could comprehend in that moment was a mean man was withholding my coffee. “Gunnar!” Gunnar’s name was barked like a whip of command. Both Gunnar and Knuckles stopped fighting, but I couldn’t be bothered. Coffee !

I snatched the cup from the guy’s hands and popped the lid off, looking at the dark liquid from heaven and inhaled deeply. I moaned in pleasure even before I took a delicate sip. Even black and so strong the shit could probably jump out and walk on its own, it was the most delicious concoction I’d ever tasted.

“Christ.” Someone wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and spun me around. “Bathroom, Pippa. Now.” The order was sharp and followed by a swat to my ass which would have made me jump but I had bigger problems. Like how to walk and drink a full cup of coffee with no lid.

Gunnar guided me into the bathroom, one hand firmly on my lower back. I clutched the coffee mug to my chest, taking small sips as I shuffled along. My mind was still foggy with sleep and caffeine deprivation.

“Drink your coffee and get cleaned up,” Gunnar said gruffly, though his touch remained gentle. “I’ll deal with our... company.” He winced as he finished, scrubbing the back of his neck before meeting my gaze and holding it.

I blinked up at him, finally registering his disheveled appearance and the red mark blooming on the side of his face. “Oh my God, are you OK?” I reached up to touch his face but he caught my wrist, hesitating before he relaxed and gave me a soft smile, letting me pet his damaged cheek.

“I’m fine. Just focus on waking up properly. I’ll handle things out there.” His eyes softened as he looked at me. “Take your time, sweetheart. I’ll snag you some

clothes.”

“Might want to snag some for yourself, though I can’t say I don’t appreciate the view.”

Gunnar glanced in the mirror at himself and his face flushed red under the forming bruise, which was kind of cute. “Fuck.” He glanced back at me and shook his head. “Fuck.” I couldn’t help it. I burst into giggles and threw myself at him. Gunnar chuckled with me, holding me tight. “Yeah. Clothes for both of us. Though, if our dads don’t want to see us naked, they shoulda fuckin’ knocked.” He pulled me up for a quick, hard kiss. Which turned into something a little hotter than either of us intended, but fuck those guys outside.

I urged Gunnar to deepen the kiss, thrusting my tongue into his mouth as his hands slid down to cup my ass. He pressed me against the bathroom counter and I moaned into his mouth, the coffee momentarily forgotten as desire flared between us. His erect cock pressed insistently against my stomach and I arched into him, craving more.

A loud bang on the door made us both jump. “Don’t even think about it!” Knuckles’ voice boomed from the other side. “Get your asses out here now!”

Gunnar pulled back with a frustrated groan, resting his forehead against mine. “Fuck. I guess we better face the music.”

I nodded as I giggled and buried my face in his chest. I kissed his pec before stepping away from him. “You go first. I really do need to clean up a bit. And get dressed.”

He gave me one last lingering look before snagging a towel to sling around his hips before slipping out of the bathroom. I heard muffled voices as I quickly used the facilities before splashing water on my face.

There was a soft knock on the door before Gunnar handed me an overnight bag. “Take your time, honey. There’s clothes and a new toothbrush as well as a few other things.”

“Do me a solid and don’t get killed?”

He barked out a laugh. “Yeah. That’s at the top of my list.” He leaned in to kiss my forehead, then left, shutting the door behind him. I heard muffled voices from the other side of the door but not raised and angry like before.

Before I dressed, I took another healthy swig of coffee. Yeah, it probably blistered my throat on the way down, but it was fucking delicious.

With a sigh, I set down the coffee cup to open the toothbrush and toothpaste I found in the bag and brush my teeth. Dressing hastily, I looked longingly at the half-empty cup. Leaving a whole half cup was just sacrilegious. So I picked it up and drank the rest. Black coffee wasn’t my preference, but it was still delicious.

I opened the door and peeked outside. Gunnar had slung on some jeans and had a T-shirt hanging from one fist while Knuckles was up in his face, pointing a finger. I’d only met my father once years ago, but I was sure the big man was Knuckles. They were on the other side of the big open space so I couldn’t hear what they were saying clearly, but the body language was pretty obvious.

“What’s going on?” I demanded as I hurried to Gunnar’s side. I started to get between the two men, but Gunnar shoved his arm out to prevent me from passing him.

“Do not!” he snapped. “Stay behind me.”

“I’m not letting him get in your face like that.” I tried to duck under Gunnar’s arm, but he snagged me by my shirt collar and tugged me back, side-stepping so I was

solidly behind him and Knuckles. Which is when I got a really good look at the man.

Knuckles was fucking huge . He looked like a giant next to Gunnar and the other man -- likely Cain, since Gunnar said it was our dads here. He was covered in tattoos over every inch of skin I could see, other than his face and neck. He wore a sleeveless black tank revealing muscled, vein-roped arms. I met his dark gaze and thought better of trying to get around Gunnar again. Instead, I fisted my hand in the back of Gunnar's shirt and took a half step back to give Gunnar room if he needed to fight.

"I ain't gonna hurt you," Knuckles grunted. The expression on his face transformed from anger to contrition. His voice was still gruff, but he looked genuinely distressed. "Sorry."

Gunnar relaxed slightly but kept me behind him. "It's all right, Pippa. Your dad just got a little... overexcited."

"Why?" I couldn't help the demanding bite to my tone. "He's the one who told you to make me your old lady. Right?"

Gunnar shrugged but didn't take his eyes from Knuckles. "Yep."

I glared at Knuckles. "Then what's all the fuss?"

"He was on top of you! In fucking bed!" Knuckles lost his cool for about a second before he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I could tell he was inhaling for patience. "He's not supposed to be in bed with you," he grumbled. "S'not right."

"What's not right? That I shouldn't have sex with the man who's making me his old lady? Because if I'm not supposed to have sex with him, who am I supposed to have sex with?"

Gunnar growled as he glanced down at me. “Me. You’re supposed to have sex with me.”

Now it was Knuckles’ turn to growl.

“Sounds like fucking Captain Caveman around here,” I grumbled. “Well?” I looked over at Cain who sat on the couch, sprawled out like he owned the place. “Are you gonna do something?”

“What do you want me to do, honey? I’m an old man. These guys are way tougher than me.” The shit-eating grin on his face said he was enjoying himself.

“You know, I really like Angel. Your wife is a sweetheart. Your daughter, Hannah, too. You? Not so much.”

Cain shrugged. “I always say let boys be boys. They’ll work it out on their own.”

I blew a curl out of my face in exasperation, then turned my attention back to Gunnar and Knuckles. Heaving out a sigh, I focused on Knuckles. It was past time for this meeting. “You’re my dad. Right?”

Knuckles nodded, his expression softening when he looked like it had been carved from granite moments before. “Yeah, sweetheart. I’m your old man.”

“Then why are you fighting with Gunnar?” I frowned, trying my best to adopt a scolding tone when I was angry as fuck. “You punched him in the face! He saved me. Just like you told him to. He’s been nothing but good to me since he found me.”

Knuckles ran a hand over his face and sighed heavily. “I know, I know. I just... seeing him... uh... you know... like that...”

“You want to prevent that in the future?” I raised my eyebrows, putting my hands on my hips, refusing to back down an inch from the big man.

“It would be my sincerest wish.”

“Great! Next time you come for a visit, you will knock on the fucking door !” I gave him a bright smile and threw my hands up like “DUH!” “Problem fucking solved.”

“Also,” Gunnar added, putting his arm around me and pulling me close. “Aren’t you supposed to be in prison?”

The two men stared at each other for several seconds before a grin split Knuckles’s face. “It’s damned good to see you, boy.” Knuckles pulled Gunnar into a tight embrace as both men clapped each other on the back several times. Hard. I thought I saw Gunnar wince, but I’d never say a word. I would never understand male bonding.

Gunnar

Once Knuckles let me go, there was my father to deal with. I'd rather continue to let Knuckles beat the fuck outta me than face my father, but I was no coward.

"Sir." I addressed him as a superior out of respect. If he wanted to be my dad, that was up to him. Still, it made my chest ache to think my father would be so disappointed in me he'd reject me.

Cain scowled. "Sir," he spat out. "Fuckin' sir." He stood abruptly and stalked toward me. Pippa stiffened, but I set her away from me, moving her toward Knuckles. Cain rolled his eyes. "And now you're protectin' your woman from me?"

"Well, you look a little like you're about to kick my ass, and I don't want Pippa gettin' in the way." I gave him a wary look, but didn't take up a defensive stance. Mainly because I knew anything he dished out I deserved.

"Little punk," he muttered at me before lunging at me to pull me into a tight embrace. Thankfully, he didn't whale on my back like Knuckles had. I wasn't sure I could take much more. Felt like Knuckles had given me the beating he was afraid to while Pippa was watching. "Your mother missed you."

"Yeah. She told me."

"Hannah, too."

"Her too."

Dad held me close for several minutes before he pulled back, blinking rapidly. “Gonna have to have a talk with Torpedo about makin’ sure he gives you a better room. This one has too much dust.”

“Yeah. Makes my eyes water too sometimes.” I grinned at my dad.

“Now. Introduce me to your woman proper-like.”

Things were better after that. Dad told me how he’d initially been disappointed in me for not bringing the situation to him or my brothers. Or anyone in Bones MC. Every time he looked at Pippa, though, he averted his gaze. Every time he did, I saw the smile on his lips.

Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to know. “OK. What’s so funny?”

“Hum?” Dad looked all innocent and shit. Like he had no clue what I was whining about.

“Every time you look at Pippa, you smile. Why?”

Cain stopped trying to hold back then and chuckled, shaking his head and wiping at his eyes. “I’m sorry. And it’s not you, Pippa. I was remembering when I barged in on Stunner and Suzie in a similar situation.”

“Suzie?” Pippa looked confused but smiled.

“My sister. Mom and Dad adopted her and my two bonehead brothers when they were little more than teenagers. At least Cliff and Dan were. Suzie was about nine or ten, I think.” I took Pippa’s hand in mine and tugged her to the couch. “Didn’t expect you here, Dad. We stayed long enough at Bones, I really thought you’d get there before we left.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky I happen to be on great terms with the president and vice president of Kiss of Death.”

“Torpedo and Bohannon ratted me out.” Gunnar grinned, shaking his head.

“I wasn’t sure I could make it to Kentucky before you left, so I went to your ultimate destination. Also, I knew where you were the second you got out of prison, I knew what you were tasked with, and I knew that motherfucker was gonna try to force you and his daughter together.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know my dad, Knuckles.”

“Said I hadn’t met him. Cain and I have worked on different sides of the table a few times.” Knuckles gave Cain a level look.

“Someone has to nudge people in the right direction when they’re being dumbasses.” The two men chuckled before clasping hands in a firm shake. “Good to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“Fuck me,” I bit out.

Pippa narrowed her eyes at Knuckles, then shifted her focus to Cain. “Did you set all this up?”

“Does Mom know about this?”

Cain and Knuckles exchanged a look. “Well.” Cain scrubbed his hand through his beard. “I mean, you wouldn’t let me keep you out of prison. The only other option I had was to make sure you had help on the inside.”

“Son of a bitch.” I shook my head, but I could totally see the beauty of it. “You’re a sneaky bastard.”

“No sneakier than you.”

“Did you know what really happened?” I knew Dad would know what I was talking about. God knew it had been a topic of conversation every fucking week I saw him in prison.

“Of course, I knew what fuckin’ happened. I know you’re all adults, but I know everything about all of you. I’ve made it my business to know so I could make sure you always had someone at your back. No matter where you are.”

There was a beat of silence before Pippa piped up cheerfully, “Well, that’s not creepy or anything. But just so we’re clear, you ever barge in our personal space like you did again, you deserve every fucking thing you see. And I’ll bring it up at family reunions and Christmas dinners. You’ll never hear the end of it. I’ll be a scourge on your sanity --”

“OK. OK. I get the message. Knock.”

“What exactly was the deal you made with Knuckles?” I had to know what had happened and how Dad intended this to end for me.

“Just a favor. A big one.” Dad sat back and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee. “Knuckles was in prison for killin’ men who raped and murdered his sister. You know that. But what I doubt Knuckles told you was that, about the time of the killin’, his cover with the CIA was about to be compromised. He could have stayed out of prison, but he and his entire team would have been outed. It would have been a death sentence for all of them.”

“How does that play with him going to prison?” I turned to Knuckles, wanting an explanation.

“The reason my sister was... hurt, was to get me in a compromising situation. They never factored in that I’d kill the men they’d hired. They’d hoped to maybe get me on video beatin’ the piss outta the bastards. What they got was way the fuck more. And by ‘they’ I mean one of the groups I’d infiltrated and was steering negotiations from behind the scenes. It’s what I do. I’m paid by someone to help get the outcome they want out of these deals. I infiltrate a group, gain their trust, and offer advice. I’d been in with that particular group, deep, for several years. I’d done enough to put the right people in place that, as long as I was in their sphere of influence, he’d never have full control over his military again. He couldn’t kill me because he wasn’t sure what my death or disappearance would do with his relations with the U.S. agencies he was working with. Since he couldn’t afford to lose those agencies’ support or business, he set me up to go to prison.” Knuckles shook his head slightly before continuing, as if remembering the moment he was describing. “When they filmed me killing those bastards, I was given the choice to plead guilty and it would be assured I wouldn’t get the death penalty. But I’d be in prison for the rest of my life. In return, my team got to live.”

“You sacrificed yourself for your team?” Pippa’s eyes shimmered, the story obviously striking a chord with her.

“Honey, if you think that’s big, you have no idea what I’d sacrifice for you. You’re the most important person in my life. Ever. But yeah. I went to prison to save the lives of my team and I don’t regret it. Though, I’ll admit, had I known it was all a setup, I’d have been more careful in the killing, then I’d have gone after that bastard, El Diablo, himself.”

A chill went up my spine and my gaze snapped to my father’s. Cain’s mien hardened, and he was laser-focused on Knuckles. I tightened my grip on Pippa’s hand, not

daring to say anything. If Knuckles was fishing, I wasn't giving him anything other than the unavoidable initial reaction.

"What dealings did you have with El Diablo?" Cain was all business now, the cunning warrior of his well-earned reputation.

"Enough to know everything he does is for a reason. He wanted me in prison for a specific purpose."

"It sounds like you're saying he deliberately set your sister up for rape and murder." Cain kept his statement neutral when I knew his insides were roiling. Because mine were too.

"Oh, he set her up to be murdered, sure. But not the rape. I think the rape, when he'd specifically told his men they were to make it a clean kill, was why he let me kill them the way I did."

"You're accusing him of killing an innocent, Knuckles. That's a hell of a thing."

Knuckles snorted. "I never said my sister was innocent. She deserved the killin'. She was working directly against El Diablo at the time. I tried to warn her, but she thought she could best him."

"You still got an ax to grind with him?" Cain's question was more of a demand. I knew that tone of voice often made grown badass Marines piss themselves. I also knew Knuckles wouldn't be one of them.

"Nah. El Diablo's a bastard -- and yes, I know your connection to him -- but he's not evil. Kind of a darker shade of gray, but not evil."

"So he threatened your team if you didn't do what he wanted."

“Yep. Was a stroke of genius, if you ask me. It also put me in a much better position to get revenge with the perfect alibi. Because El Diablo wasn’t the real threat. He was just doing a job he was paid to do. After his contract was up and El Diablo fulfilled his end, he came back to me and we took down the motherfucker in spectacular fashion. Took a few years, but it was worth it.

“While I was in a forced relationship with El Diablo, was when that bastard, Slash and his minions took over Kiss of Death. They killed Dart, our president, and Slash and Rat Man turned my club into a fuckin’ snake pit.”

“If it makes you feel better, we got most of the bastards. Bones and Salvation’s Bane.” Cain rubbed a finger over his lower lip. “Couple of ‘em died pretty hard.”

“I’d hoped you would. Did my best to put ‘em in your path.”

Cain snorted. “Always gotta one-up, huh?”

Knuckles shrugged. “Just keepin’ you on your toes, old man.”

“Was there a point to this fuckin’ story, Knuckles? If not, you’re borin’ me to tears.” Dad wasn’t a good loser even with us kids. Thinking Knuckles had gotten one over on him fared about as well as it would have for one of us.

“Yeah. The point is, all this shit with Gunnar went down just as El Diablo was gettin’ ready to get me out of prison. He knew me and you had a connection, so he told me what was going on and that the youngster over there was forcin’ the issue and pleading guilty. It was mostly done before he could do anything about it. Wrath hadn’t yet joined him, and El Diablo hadn’t had enough of a warnin’ to head things off.”

“What?” I was starting to feel more than a bit betrayed, which pissed me the fuck off.

Pippa patted my knee, and her touch helped to ground me.

“El Diablo agreed to get you sent to Terre Haute if I could get you housed with me. I was supposed to teach you how to survive and keep you alive.”

“In return for what?” I bit the question out between clenched teeth. “I don’t like being manipulated, Knuckles. What the fuck?”

“Calm your tits, kid. Your old man saved my life on more than one occasion. I thought for the most part we were even, but you’re his kid. I did what I promised and got you housed with me. I tried to teach you how to not only survive but thrive, and I think you did.”

“And Pippa?”

“What about her? You went after her on your own. Ain’t gonna lie and say I didn’t push you toward her from the moment I realized her mother wasn’t all she claimed to be. I did. That’s when I started showin’ you pictures. It’s why I told you about her when I figured out Beth was the bitch she is.”

“My mom terrified me with stories of you.” Pippa spoke softly. “The only reason I didn’t run screaming from Gunnar when he told me you’d sent him is because I couldn’t. I think the two things that let me accept him as easy as I did were his treatment of me, and the fact my mother was a monster.”

“Honey, trust me when I tell you, she’s gettin’ hers.”

“Was she the reason I got taken?”

Everything in me rebelled at that question. I grunted and pulled Pippa into my arms.

“Shut up, Knuckles. Not another word.”

“She asked the question, boy. She has the right to know.”

“I have the right as her man to keep shit from her that will give her nightmares, Knuckles.”

“No, Gunnar. I need to know.”

“Pippa --”

She leaned in and pressed her lips to mine for a long moment. “You’ll be here with me. You’ll keep the nightmares away, but I have to know for sure.”

I tilted my head at her, narrowing my gaze. “You suspected?”

“She was my mother in name only, Gunnar. I knew from a young age something wasn’t right. She made it clear I was a nuisance.”

“You didn’t seem unhappy when she introduced us.” Knuckles leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees.

“That’s because it didn’t start in earnest until after that visit. Like she did what she had to until you met me, then she didn’t give a shit.”

Knuckles clenched his fists. “Yeah, honey. She had everything to do with why you got taken. The whole reason she had a thing with me was to get pregnant with my kid.”

“Why?” Pippa trembled in my arms, but she didn’t back down. While I didn’t like it, I certainly respected it.

“Leverage. Money. I have control over eighty percent of certain goods in the South

Central and Southeastern U.S. She had interest in some of those goods.” I knew Knuckles was being deliberately vague, but he got his message across. “So she played the long con. And used a child to do it. Woulda worked too. If it hadn’t been for Gunnar.”

“You said that day you knew I’d help you.”

“I did. That’s who you are, boy. You consider me family as much as I consider you family, and you’d do anything to help your family. It’s how you ended up in my tender care in the first Goddamned place.”

“So what happens now?” I needed to know what he expected my part going forward to be, because I had no doubt Knuckles had a longer plan than simply me rescuing the girl and living happily ever after.

“Now, I go huntin’. I’m gonna find that bitch, and I’m going to end her.”

Pippa gasped and sat up straighter. “You can’t.”

“I can, Pippa. And I am. I’m sorry if it hurts you, but I can’t let her live. Any woman who would do what she had done to you -- for any reason -- doesn’t deserve to live.”

“Surely she hadn’t meant for them to actually sell me.” She shivered and clung to me tighter.

“Baby, I wish I could say she didn’t, but I’ve seen the proof myself.”

“What do you need from me? Pippa is safe in this compound if you need my help.”

“Nope. Your only job from this point forward is to take care of Pippa and any rug rats you have. Find your place here. Learn how to function on the outside. Learn to share

your life with Pippa because it's not gonna be as easy as it seems right now. Once I get back, we'll see where you're gonna be the best asset for Kiss of Death."

"Christ," Cain interrupted. He sounded more amused than irritated or angry. Like this was all something he'd foreseen but hadn't wanted to admit. "Surely to God Torpedo ain't makin' you vice president again."

"Nope. He's makin' me sergeant at arms. At least until he decides he's got Kiss of Death established and remade the way he wants it. This is my club. Always was. Torpedo respects that."

"Can't say I'm surprised. Or that you're not the right person to lead this ragtag bunch."

"Course I am. Though, I have to admit, from what I've seen of your guys, Torpedo and Bohannon have done better than I could have with everything that happened before. The club needed the break. Just wish it hadn't been seventeen fuckin' years."

"Anything else we need to clear the air on?" Cain sat back in the familiar relaxed posture I'd always associated with my dad.

Knuckles shook his head. "Can't think of anything."

"So you're out for good, then?" The thought of my friend being out of that hellhole made me happy. And I wasn't too proud to admit I was glad I'd get to see him, if not every day, most days.

"I am." He grinned. "I'll still be with you to keep you in line." He winked at Pippa. "I'll make sure he always treats you right."

"You don't have to worry about him being good to me." She looked up at me and

gave me a watery smile. “He’s treated me better in the last couple of days than I’ve ever been treated. I’m glad you chose him for me.” Christ, I loved the way she phrased that. I’d been chosen. For her protector. To be the man who loved her for the rest of her life.

“Good, then.” Knuckles stood. “I’m going to have a word with Torpedo, and I imagine Cain wants to be in on it.”

“Damned fuckin’ straight.” Dad stood. When he stood in front of us, he leaned down and kissed the top of Pippa’s head. “You let me know if you need anything, honey. You’re my daughter now, too.”

“Just... accept Gunnar for the man he is. I know he can’t do the things with your company his brothers can because of his background. But he’s a good man who would literally give everything to protect his family.”

“I know, honey. I’ve always been proud of Gunnar. All my boys turned out to be great men, but Gunnar is ruthless in a way the others never could be. Mama was right. It was best you got away from me during the years when a boy becomes a man. We’d have been at each other’s throats constantly, and your mother would have divorced me.”

“Yeah, well, the Marines would have been a preferred choice.”

“While I’d have preferred the military to have been in your future instead of prison, I can’t regret what you did or condemn you for it. You protected your sister with everything you had. You did what you thought was the best thing for her in a very fuckin’ bad situation.” He grinned. “I look at it this way. You went to prison and came out a better man for it. That’s something very difficult to accomplish.”

“Don’t know about better, but I’m pretty sure I’m meaner.”

“Christ, I’ve missed you, son.” Cain cleared his throat. Yeah. I got it.

“Damned dust. I’m definitely gonna have to have a word with Torpedo.”

Pippa

When Gunnar and I were finally alone, I had a good cry. And really. It had been a long time coming. Had it only been two days since Gunnar had rescued me? It felt like a lifetime ago. Part of me was afraid this was all a dream. An illusion I'd convinced myself was real to escape the hell I'd been thrust into. But every time I went to sleep, I woke up with Gunnar wrapped around me. He had barely left my side, and only when I had to go to the bathroom. It should have felt smothering. Instead, it felt right. Like this was how my life was supposed to be. It was definitely how I wanted it to be from now on.

"Whatcha doin', babe?" Gunnar came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my neck. His beard tickled that sensitive spot and I giggled.

"Waiting on you. I thought we'd spend the night at home." We'd been given indefinite use of the warehouse flat and I was growing to love the wide-open spaces. The place really was fantastic. And so not what I expected from a motorcycle club. Probably why stereotypes weren't all they were cracked up to be.

"Stay home? You don't want to go to a wild party?" He grinned against my neck sending shivers through my body.

"Didn't say that." I reached behind me and between us to cup the front of his jeans. His cock was rapidly hardening, which was exactly what I wanted.

"Oh? So, you do want to have a wild party." He grinned down at me.

“Absolutely. Pretty sure we can have as wild a party as you want right here.”

Gunnar growled low in his throat, his hands tightening on my hips. “You’re playing with fire, little girl.”

I turned in his arms to face him, pressing my body flush against his. “Maybe I want to get burned.”

His eyes darkened with lust as he gazed down at me. Without warning, he scooped me up and tossed me over his shoulder, striding purposefully toward the bed in the far corner of the big flat. I squealed in delight, playfully smacking his firm ass.

“Oh, you’re in for it now,” he rumbled.

He tossed me onto the bed and crawled over me, caging me in with his muscular arms. Gunnar lowered his face to mine, taking my lips in a searing kiss that left me breathless. I tangled my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer as our tongues danced.

“Gonna fuck you in a bit. When I do, you’re gonna scream my name at the top of your lungs. Everybody in the whole Goddamned compound is gonna know who you belong to, woman.”

“Oh, God, yes,” I moaned, arching up against him. “Fuck me!”

He growled low in his throat and captured my lips in another scorching kiss. His hands roamed over my body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I tugged impatiently at his shirt, needing to feel his bare skin against mine.

Gunnar sat back on his heels and yanked his shirt off over his head, tossing it carelessly aside. I raked my gaze hungrily over his tattooed, muscular torso. I reached out to trace the intricate designs inked on his skin, marveling at the contrast between the hard planes of muscle and the softer dusting of hair.

“Like what you see?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“You know I do,” I replied breathlessly.

In response, he gripped the hem of my shirt and shoved it over my head before shedding my bra as well. “So fuckin’ beautiful,” he murmured, palming a breast in each hand. I gasped as he lowered his mouth to one stiff peak and sucked.

“Gunnar, please,” I whimpered. “I need you.”

He lifted his head, his dark eyes burning with desire. “Tell me what you need, baby. What do you want?”

“I need you inside me. Fuck me! Please!” I reached between us to fumble with his belt buckle. He sat up and helped me shove his jeans and boxers down his hips so his cock sprang free, pointing due north.

“Fuck,” he bit out as he fisted his cock. The head was an angry purple while pearly pre-come seeped from the tip. “We’re gonna have to do a lot of this so I can get used to you. Otherwise, I’m never gonna last more than a hot second.”

I would have laughed if I’d been capable of it, but the more he touched me, talked dirty to me, encouraged me to talk dirty to him... Yeah. I was in a bad way.

He positioned himself at my entrance and slowly pressed into me, groaning as I stretched around his thick girth. I whimpered, but desperately needed more. The burn hurt, but in a good way. The feeling of fullness and submission caused my inner muscles to clench around him, holding him inside me.

“Fuckin’ heaven,” Gunnar muttered. “You’re so fuckin’ tight,” he growled, beginning a steady rhythm that had him plunging deep and withdrawing slowly. “Tell me you like this, Pippa. Tell me!”

“Oh fuck! Yes,” I moaned, lifting my hips to meet his thrusts. “Harder! Harder!” My pleas sounded as desperate as I felt. I thought I might explode at any moment, and I wasn’t certain I’d survive the detonation. And God! I loved a good metaphor!

Gunnar obeyed, slamming into me with enough force to jostle the bed. I cried out his name and arched my back, loving the feeling of him plowing into me over and over again. My nails raked down his back, leaving furrows in the skin there. He caught my hands in his and held them above my head.

“Mine,” he growled against my neck, nipping at the sensitive skin there. “You’re fucking mine.”

“Yes,” I gasped. “Yours. I’m yours!”

Gunnar moved his hand between us, finding my clit and rubbing it with rough brushes and pinches with his fingers. I screamed his name as an orgasm rocketed through my body, clenching tight around him with each wave of pleasure until he followed suit with a shout of his own. His hips pistoned harder, driving deeper as he emptied himself inside me.

Gunnar collapsed on top of me, his weight a comforting anchor as we both caught our breath. I reveled in the feeling of his body pressed against mine, his skin slick with sweat. I traced lazy patterns on his back with my fingers. I could feel his heart hammering against my chest where he was pressed so close to me. Then his heart rate slowed, and it was like he was taking me with him. My heart wanted to follow the beat of his and it wasn’t long before we both finally settled.

After a few minutes, Gunnar lifted his head to look at me, his dark eyes soft with emotion. “You OK, baby?” he asked, brushing a strand of hair from my face. Gunnar leaned forward to capture my lips in a long, slow kiss that tasted like victory and love and belonging all rolled into one.

When he ended the kiss, I smiled up at him. “I couldn’t be more perfect. You’re amazing.”

He grinned, looking pleased with himself. “Glad you enjoyed it. I aim to please.”

“Oh, you definitely pleased,” I assured him with a giggle.

Gunnar rolled to the side, pulling me with him so I was draped across his chest. His arms wrapped around me. “We’re gonna make a go of this, Pippa. And I swear to you, I’ll be everything you need.”

“It goes both ways. I’ll be what you need too.”

When he smiled up at me, I thought I’d never seen him look more carefree. Or more contented. “Honey, you already are.”

Who can possibly know they’re in love with someone in a mere couple of days? Impossible, right? No. It wasn’t impossible.

“I love you Gunnar. I don’t care if it’s only been a couple of days. I know with everything I am that I love you.”

He kissed me again. “I love you too. I know what love looks like because I saw it in my mom and dad every day when I was growing up. I understand the looks he used to give her when she wasn’t looking now. My dad, Cain Gill, the man everyone who knows him is afraid of, would look at my mom like she hung the moon. Like his next breath depended on whether or not she noticed and approved of him. Dad is so in love with my mom it hurts to watch them together sometimes. That’s how I feel when I look at you.”

“I never thought I’d have this,” I admitted softly. “I’m not even sure I truly believed love like what you described existed. Now I know it does.”

“I never thought I’d have this either,” he admitted softly. “After prison and shit, I figured I’d probably end up alone or dead. But now I’ve got you, and I ain’t ever letting go.”

I snuggled into his warmth, feeling safe and cherished. “Promise?”

“I swear it,” he said fiercely. “You’re mine now, Pippa.”

Gunnar reached for the blanket beside us and tossed it over my body. He rested one hand possessively on my ass, rubbing gently. The steady beat of his heart and the soothing feel of his hands on my skin had my eyelids growing heavier and heavier as each second passed.

I couldn’t help but wonder what the future held for us. Somehow, I thought this might be the start of a grand adventure. I was definitely looking forward to what was headed our way. I knew there would be trials ahead, and I’d be lying if I said the thought of Knuckles going after and killing my mother was more than a little disconcerting, but I knew I could handle it. Gunnar would see to it.

And somehow, some way, we really would live happily ever after.