



Rage's Solace (Savage Legion MC #10)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: The angel I lost just landed in hell. I'll burn down the world to keep her safe.

They call me Rage for a reason. Burned-out paramedic, spendin' my nights patchin' up lives on Las Salinas' deadly highways and drownin' the darkness with my club brothers.

But the real weight? That's the ghost I can't shake—the woman who tore out my heart and ran eleven years ago. I've spent every damn day since tryin' to forget her.

Then fate slams her back into my life. Bleedin' out on her floor, her little girl clingin' to me like I'm all she's got. SWAT takes down her psycho husband, but it's on me to keep her alive.

Two days at her bedside, while shes fightin' for her life, I find myself takin care of her daughter. I don't know jack about kids, but the bond I feel with her little girl? That's real.

Now, I'm lookin' at what I lost—and I'm done lettin' them go. Not until she's safe. Not until she knows she still owns every broken piece of me.

Even if her truth destroys us both.

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Rage

I stand in front of my bathroom mirror with a towel wrapped around my waist. The green eyes looking back at me carry a haunted edge from all the things I've seen and experienced in my lifetime.

My tatted-up body is still wet, and I can feel little trails of water trickling down my chest. It's strange that when the dripping water hits one of my many scars, I can't feel a thing. Scar tissue is numb to light touches like that. I continue with my shaving, remembering where I got each scar and tattoo. Of course, all my tats have a special meaning, something I want to remember forever. There's one of woman running away from a violent tornado, which represents my mother and father. The thing is, she ran out on me as well as him.

I kind of miss my full beard, for a while I had to be clean shaven so I could wear a respirator as part of my role as an EMT. If I wanted, I could grow it back, but right now I'm rocking a neatly trimmed goatee.

I rinse the razor, put it in its holder to drip dry and get on with brushing my teeth and combing my wavy, brown, shoulder-length hair, which I always wear tied back at the nape of my neck in a stubby ponytail.

Today is my day off, so I slide into my most comfortable pair of jeans and wear a white t-shirt under my cut. Taking a minute to stuff a clean uniform and work gear into a duffle bag—because a day off can easily turn into a day on for me—I head out to meet up with my club brothers. We're hosting a summer festival to raise money for the local women's shelter. One of my club brothers is married to the social worker in

charge of the facility and we're hoping this will be the first of many such events. My contribution is a keg, which I'll need to pick up along the way. Unfortunately, that means I'll be taking my pickup truck rather than my bike.

As I'm walking out the door, something niggles at the back of my mind, making me think that I might have had another nightmare last night. If I don't wake up, I don't remember them but always feel a little off the next day. The anxious feeling twisting in my gut must be from that. What else could it be?

I turn, carefully lock the door to my house and stop to pet Boots, my cat, before climbing into my fire engine red pickup truck and head for town. I've reserved my keg, so it should just be a matter of loading it up.

Ambling down the road, I listen to my favorite country station. My club brothers always laugh about my taste in music, but you can't beat the greats. I even like Kenny Rogers, and I find myself singing along with him and the tale of Lucille. It's a song I can relate to, I think wryly. Then again, a broken heart is just one of a long list of bad experiences. If I'm being honest, I don't even know if it's the worst. Shoving those hard times out of my mind, I concentrate on the music and keeping the good vibe that I have going.

I pull in at the store and it takes no time at all to load up the keg. By the time I get to the center of town, the whole festival is just getting geared up. I'm pretty jazzed when Ven and Amy come over the moment they see me pull in. I'm happy my friend found a good woman. Amy's taken to the biker lifestyle like a fish to water. She's not only in his property cut but she's wearing tight fitting leather pants and a shirt that shows off her figure.

Ven teases me as he walks up, "Envy is one of the original seven deadly sins, so you'd best keep your eyes off my wife."

I can tell he's joking, so I flash him a feral grin. "You're the fucking luckiest man alive when it comes to old ladies. The least you can do is let me look."

He jumps into the back of my truck and begins maneuvering the keg out for me to grab. "Sneak a glance if you must, but no full-on staring, because that is all kinds of wrong."

I give Amy a quick glance and wiggle my eyebrows. It was only a quick look I gave her, she's married to my best friend and she's having his baby—one of the reasons she's looking a bit curvier than normal—and I absolutely wouldn't perve on her. She busts out laughing and puts up some pretense at helping me with the keg. Ven jumps out of the truck, telling her, "No lifting."

She takes a step back with her hands in the air. "I'm not some fragile little flower, I'm just having a baby, but if you want, I'll leave it to the big strong men who are always dying to put their muscles to good use." As we walk it awkwardly over to the drink station I ask, "Why do I get the feeling your woman was making fun of us just now."

He grunts. "Because she was, apparently my displays of brute strength, are highly amusing," he turns to me and grins, then spins around with his index finger resting on the side of the keg and shouts over to Amy, "Look, one finger!"

His old lady shakes her head, trying to keep the smile off her face. I love seeing how at ease they are with each other, but sometimes it reminds me too much of what I lost.

We heave the keg onto the stand, and I begin fitting the tap into place. Someone calls Ven's name, and he wanders off with Amy at his side. Something's wrong with the tap. I can't get it to fit into the hole properly, I'm mumbling and cursing under my breath when I hear a sultry feminine voice come from behind me. "Do you need some help? I've never known Raymond Anderson to have a problem finding the right

hole.”

I shoot Brittany a dirty look over my shoulder. I don't think that woman is ever gonna give up in her hunt for an old man. “Don't even try it on with me, Britt. I am not, nor have I ever been interested in you.”

She stalks to stand beside me and gives me an evil glare. “What in the hell makes you think I'm interested in you? She holds up a red party cup for me to see. “I'm just a thirsty girl looking for a drink.”

Frustrated, I slam the tap into the hole and give it a forceful turn to lock it into place. Turning to face the club girl I like the least, I gesture towards the tap. “Help yourself. But don't let me catch you with your mouth under the spigot. Shit's not cool.”

She makes an angry, indignant sound in the back of her throat. “I would never.”

“Liar. I've seen you try it at the clubhouse when you were three sheets to the wind.”

She opens her mouth to debate the allegation but apparently thinks better of it and snaps her mouth closed.

I feel a twinge of guilt speaking to her like this, but then I remember she got banned for trying to break into one of the brothers' bikes, but she somehow begged her way back in. She's a bad seed, and it's just a matter of time before she pulls something that will result in a perma-ban. Until then, I just have to suffer her attempts at being social. I guess after Haze, her favorite brother, got married and now Venom is off the market, her gaze has swung to me. Maybe I should have been pissed at being third choice, but truthfully, I'd prefer to not be on her radar at all.

I hustle over to Siege, Rigs, Tank, and Dutch. The only club officer missing is Rider. Siege jerks his chin when he sees me coming. “Ven said that keg you brought was

nice and cold. Good job, Rage.”

I give a shrug with one shoulder. “I made sure they kept it in their walk-in cooler. Ain’t nobody in this world likes warm beer. It tastes like piss if you ask me.”

Tank slaps me on the back good-naturedly, grabbing my shoulder. “I’m surprised you know what piss tastes like, brother.”

I shake him away angrily, I can’t help it but I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy, “I don’t, but it tastes like piss smells to me. And don’t tell me you’ve never smelled piss before, because I know that ain’t true.”

Tank holds both of his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Calm the fuck down, Rage. I was only joking around, fuck man, you really need to get your dick wet and work off some of that anger.”

“My dick is doing just fine,” I snap back. Though truth be told, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had sex. It seemed that lately we went from one crisis to another, and I had a hard enough time dealing with my own issues than to get someone else involved in my shit.

Thankfully, Dutch cuts in, “You want to help me on the grill?”

“Absofuckinglutely. I’m training to become a grill master. It’s my backup plan for when I get sick and tired of stitching up your hairy asses and scraping people off the pavement all night.”

I follow Dutch over to a line of gas grills. He asks, “Was last night another rough one for you.”

“Yeah, we responded to a wreck involving a mommy van and a big rig.”

Dutch frowns. “I can guess which one won when they went head-to-head.”

“Yeah, the van was mangled pretty bad. The mother died instantly and the kids just kept crying for her until their dad arrived, there was nothing we could have done for her. It was fucking horrible.”

“I seriously don’t know how you cope with that shit without losing your fucking mind, Rage.”

“I don’t. It makes me angry to see good people die. I keep it all bottled up until it comes spilling out, usually at the worst moment imaginable. I didn’t mean to get pissed at Tank, it’s just it takes time to decompress from a bad shift.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Passing me a bottle of beer from the ice bucket beside the grill, he says, “Here’s the upside. You’re a smart, capable brother with good insight into his own problems. Not everyone has that advantage.”

When he holds out his bottle, I bring mine up and clank it against his. “Damn straight. I’m the only one who fully knows how fucked up I really am.”

We both drink and talk a few more minutes until Rider and Frannie arrive with boxes of frozen burgers and packs of hot dogs. Tank and I fire up the grills and get busy cooking up the meat. Our little festival is in full swing within the hour and is rocking pretty much all day.

The club girls were wearing Savage Legion MC t-shirts because they’re helping host the event. They look on it as a badge of honor and strut around like they’re fucking queens. Makes a change from all the shit-stirring they usually do. They start bringing plates, which we fill with buns and burgers and then walk off selling them to the general public. It’s better than having dozens of people crowding the grills. Being surrounded that way would spike my anxiety, I don’t like people invading my

personal space and when crowds gather, that's sure to happen. I try and keep a handle on it, but when I have a bad night it's harder to keep control.

I watch the club girls selling plate after plate and stuffing the money into their apron pockets. Before long, their pockets are bulging, and they have to stop by and let the club officers put it in a lock box. Dutch is our club treasurer. He'd probably be in charge of the money if he hadn't opted to run the grill today.

After about three hours, I get relieved by Talon, so I grab a plate and head over to the bake sale to see how Ven and Amy are doing. Leaning back against Ven's car, I eat and watch them sell a metric fuck ton of sweets. I was going to ask about the cage, but then I remembered that Amy's pregnant. Knowing how protective Ven is over her, he's probably gonna be driving around in that box for the next few months.

Amy catches my eye. "See anything that looks good to you, Rage?"

"Are those chocolate chip cookies?" I ask. My mouth is watering at the thought of one of them, I might not be a big drinker, but chocolate is my one addiction.

"Yes, they are. It's Meli's recipe." She holds one up for me to see. "Fair warning, my friend. If you take even one bite, you're gonna be paying me to make these for the rest of your natural life."

I reach for my wallet with one hand while throwing away my paper plate with the other. "I'll take 'em."

Her face scrunches up into a delightfully confused expression. "How many do you want?"

"All of 'em. Every single one you have left."

Her face lights up but Ven doesn't seem so happy about this turn of events. I see him reach out, snatch one off the table and shove it into his inside vest pocket. I laugh. Amy raises an eyebrow, "Seriously, you want them all?"

"I never joke about cookies. I'll pay cold hard cash for every single one of them."

She starts gathering them all up and putting them in a box.

"Yeah, I want to share them with my crew," I say.

Her expression turns warm and adoring. "Aw, that the nicest thing I've heard for a while."

Ven starts laughing.

Amy gives her old man a quizzical look, "You know something I don't?"

"His paramedic buddies will be lucky if they get crumbs."

"Fuck off," I mutter, though my brother is not telling a lie.

"Well, it's all for a good cause," Amy says as she tapes down the lid of the box.

"What do I owe you?" I ask as I pull out my wallet.

She hands over the box and says, "There are seventy-two cookies in there at fifty cents each, so that's thirty-six dollars."

I pull out a hundred-dollar bill and hand it to her. "How much for the recipe?"

"It's secret, Meli told me not to tell a soul," she says, pretending to zip her lips.

“You’re talking about my surrogate mother there,” I say with a grin. Me and Ven made a pact to be blood brothers, which means his mom, Meli, is mine too... sort of. “Aw, c’mon, I’m sure Meli won’t mind, I’m not gonna sell them.”

“I guess as it’s you, then it’ll be okay.” She pulls her phone out and types out a text message to me before making a big production out of hitting send. “There you go. It’s good doing business with you.”

Before I can thank her, my phone begins ringing. It’s the ringtone I assigned to my unit commander. Looks like my day off is now officially over, it’s a good job I only had the one beer well over an hour ago. I mutter under my breath as I pull out my phone.

“This is Rage, what’s up?”

“We have a five-car pileup involving a tanker truck full of toxic chemicals about twenty miles out of town.”

Shifting the box in my arms, I ask, “Want me to head that way? I can be there in about fifteen minutes.”

“No, we’ve both ambulances there already and Rhone County is sending help as well. We just got a call from the Las Salinas PD of a hostage situation involving a family of three. The daughter called to report that her mother had been shot by her father. When the police arrived, he wouldn’t let them in. They’re organizing their SWAT team and when they swarm the place, we’re gonna need someone to see to the injured.”

“Fucking hell, text me the address and I’ll be there ASAP.”

“You got it. Just remember, Rage, park your ass and don’t move in until the police

give you the go ahead.”

“Roger that, boss,” I reply stoically. I hate domestic violence situations, especially the ones involving kids.

I was already walking to my truck by the time the conversation was over. I stow the box behind my seat and head for the scene with my overhead lights flashing. People get the fuck out of my way because this is a small town where people actually care about one another. Most people know me and what I do for a living, so they give way.

Me? I worry all the way there that the police will drag their feet about swarming the place until it's too late, or that her injuries will be too severe, and I won't be able to stabilize her. I worry about the kid and what seeing all this will do to their mental health. I worry about what having another death on my conscience would do to me.

I arrive and park on the other side of the street since all the police cars have stopped in the middle of the road. They're using their vehicles as cover so they can try to talk the dude down.

They must have been at it for more a few minutes because the man is yelling at them.

I jump out of the truck, pull off my cut and grab my EMS uniform top before racing out to speak to the officer in charge. My hand grips my medical bag as I kneel down behind the vehicle. “Sergeant Pike. What the hell is going on? He sounds drunk or high.”

He's talking on his two-way radio and glances up at me. “Glad you're here, Rage. He's pretty amped up. My money is on both, drugs and alcohol. My officers went

door-to-door when we first arrived. The neighbors report regular disturbances. The family used to keep themselves to themselves, but in the last year something must have happened. They've called the police after hearing screaming from the house three times this year. We've arrested him twice and he gets bailed out within hours."

"So this ain't his first rodeo," I say grimly, taking a minute to pull on my uniform shirt so everyone knows not to fucking shoot me.

"Unfortunately, not. He won't let the woman go or any of us in to perform first aid."

"Maybe he'll let me in. EMS workers aren't law enforcement, so I've at least got a chance."

The older man's gaze was one of deep concern. "This man's off his rocker. You're gonna get yourself shot if you try to get in there. You do know that, right?"

I reach out and hold the button down on his two-way radio. "Just want to let everyone know that I'm going to try to get into the house to check on the wounded woman. I'm doing it of my own volition so don't be trying to lay blame on anyone else if things go sideways for me in there."

"You've lost your mind, Rage." His voice was deadly serious, enough to almost make me second guess my decision. Then the thought of some kid watching her mom bleed out on the floor races through my mind.

"Most all paramedics have a wild streak. It's what drives us to do what we do."

"Well, be careful. If he escalates, get the hell outta there."

"Will do," I lie.

From the moment I step out on that lawn my fate will be irrevocably intertwined with those hostages. In my mind, my job is to keep the woman and child alive until the police can resolve the situation. Nothing else matters. I can do this, I tell myself.

Getting to my feet, I slowly walk out in front of the vehicle with my bag in one hand and my other raised in the air. “Don’t shoot. I’m not a cop. I’m a paramedic here to treat your wife’s injuries.”

“Step the fuck back. My wife is fine. She doesn’t need you or any damn body else. Just me,” he screams. “She just needs me.”

I take a step closer. “Sir, your wife has been shot, you don’t want to make this situation any worse than it is.”

“That was an accident. It wasn’t my fault and I’m not going to fucking jail over something that I didn’t mean to happen.”

“Look, I don’t care about any of that. Your wife is injured. My job is to patch her up. Let me do that and I’ll leave right away.”

“No. All you first responders have hero complexes. I don’t trust you to be inside my house, around my family.”

“Well, if your wife dies, it’s going to be ten times harder to prove it was an accident. And killing someone is much more serious than just shooting someone. I think it would be in your best interest to let me have a look at her. It could be like you said, nothing serious. But what if you’re wrong and she dies? I’m sure you wouldn’t want that on your conscience.”

The man steps out of the shadows just a bit and then immediately pulls back. “Do I know you? Your voice sounds familiar.”

“I’m a paramedic. You’re living in a mini mansion. I don’t think we travel in the same circles.”

I hear him snort a laugh at my self-effacing comment. “Fine. Get your ass in here. If you try anything cute, I’ll blow your fucking head off.”

I swiftly move forward and remind him, “I thought you were trying to avoid committing murder today, especially with all those cops watching.”

He reaches out and gives me rough shove as I walk through the door. “She’s in the back of the living room. I told her to get up off the fucking floor, but she doesn’t listen.” Turning to his wife, he shouts, “She never fucking listens to a damn word I have to say. Not ever. No matter how many times I tell her to stay in the fucking house.”

I rush to her side and kneel down as he takes a break from ranting long enough to take another swig out of his whiskey bottle. Her hair is matted with blood, and I can’t see her face. She moves slightly and I see a girl of eight or nine hiding behind her. No, the woman is using her body to press the little girl back against the wall. My blood runs cold as I realize she’s protecting the child with her own body, even though she’s bleeding so bad, the carpet is soaked with her blood.

I reach out to take her pulse but the man behind me roars, “Don’t fucking touch her. She’s mine.”

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Priscilla

I feel lightheaded but I'm vaguely aware that Conrad is arguing with someone, another man it sounds like. It slowly dawns on me that they're talking about me. I try not to move around too much because I feel like I bleed more when I move.

Mia is still as death behind me. One of her hands comes up to grasp my shoulder. "Mommy, are you okay?" she whispers in a small, terrified voice.

I respond in a barely audible tone while holding my hand to my chest. "Yes. Be still, baby. Your papa's having another bad day."

My Mia would normally remind me that she's not a baby anymore. And that ten-year-olds are practically grown. But not today. Right now we're both in survival mode. Everything hangs in the balance of not setting Conrad off even more.

Her small hand flexes on my shoulder. "I'm scared, Mommy. Really scared this time."

For the first time ever, I respond, "I am too, baby. No matter what happens, I want you to know that I love you."

That's when Conrad opens the door to let the medical person in. I don't know if this person is a doctor, nurse, or EMT. All I know is that my chances of surviving this day just increased exponentially.

I can hear the man kneel in front of me and he tries to move my hair out of my face,

probably to ask me where it hurts. Isn't that normally what they do? I can't think straight because Conrad is losing his mind over the man helping me.

He raises his voice to match the energy Conrad is giving off. "I'm here to save your wife's life. Have you seen how much blood she's lost already? She needs help before she bleeds out on your living room floor."

"Don't try anything stupid."

"There's only one person who's doing anything stupid today," the man mutters under his breath. His voice suddenly sounds so familiar, but I can't seem to place it. My mind is all muddled. All I know is that I have to protect Mia and survive this day because I can't trust Conrad not to start taking all his rage out on her once I'm gone. Therefore, I fight to stay conscious. I fight hard to survive. The first thing I do is take my hand away from my chest.

When he sees my index finger shift from the bullet hole, he curses under his breath again. He doesn't like that I'm injured. It makes him angry. My foggy brain likes that because it means he's protective. It's been so long since anyone protected me that I relax into his care.

He gasps and his hands still on me for a second. Then he states softly, "You're gonna make it through this Prissy girl. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

I suddenly place that voice. There's only one person who ever called me that. Raymond Anderson. I reach out with one bloody hand and grasp his arm. It's really him. He's not dead, like they said. He's here and real and whole.

No, I'm hallucinating, he died over ten years ago. Am I dying? Has Ray come to take me to heaven?

It's getting harder to talk but I force myself to get out, "Mia. No matter what happens to me, you've got to protect Mia."

His hand comes out to cover my wound with something thick and soft like bandages. He whispers, "The little girl. Is her name Mia?"

I nod as darkness closes in around me. I feel lightheaded. It's so painful it takes my breath away.

"Come on Prissy, stay with me." My brain is on slow motion and although I can hear his words, I can't really process them. He goes back to messing with the bullet wound, packing it with more gauze, I think. I can hear Mia crying, then suddenly the room explodes with men in black riot gear.

I barely catch a glimpse of them before Raymond throws his body over mine and shouts to Mia, "Stay down kid. All the way down. I'll cover you."

It's all too much. I don't know if I got shot again or what but my eyelids close so slowly that I can see them shutting in a way that I never did before, and I'm frightened that this is the last thing I'll ever see.

I wake up, expecting to be in an ambulance but I'm in a regular vehicle, a truck maybe. I can hear Mia crying in the back and an IV bag hanging off Raymond's rear view mirror.

When I lift my head to look at him, he reaches out to touch my cheek. "Sorry, all the ambulances are at the site of a large motor vehicle accident. I'm improvising because you need to be at the ER, ASAP."

“Mommy, are you okay? I thought you died.”

Damn Conrad all the way to hell for putting Mia through this. I try to organize my thoughts so I can say something to make her feel better, but Raymond beats me to the punch.

“Hey, your mom is going to be fine. She’s just lost a lot of blood and needs to conserve her energy to get better right now. Let’s let her rest, okay pumpkin?”

“Alright. I get it,” Mia responds, sounding more than a little despondent.

I snatch up all my energy and tell him, “Don’t let Conrad take her.”

He glances at me for a second before saying, “Conrad didn’t make it.”

I want to ask more questions, but I just can’t. I lay my head back down and try to gather my scattered thoughts. At first, I can’t believe it’s true, that the man I’ve been trapped with for the last eleven years is gone, just like that. And what are the chances that Raymond Anderson walked back into my life the very moment I needed him the most? It’s one in a million.

I must have blacked out again because when I wake up, I’m in a hospital room. There are two chairs beside my bed, one for Ray and the other for Mia. Seeing them side-by-side is strange. They both have the same green eyes, and brown, naturally curly hair. It makes me wonder if he can see what I see when I look at them together. For a moment, a strange thought springs into my mind, but then I come to my senses. It can’t be true, it’s wishful thinking. Then another thought crosses through my mind, Ray is dead, he died over a decade ago in a motorcycle accident. I saw his grave for myself.

My heart starts racing and it must have set the machines off bleeping because Ray jumps to his feet and rushes to my bedside. Mia is standing beside him in an instant, her eyes wide with concern, “Mommy, how are you feeling? The doctor said you were going to be okay. Do you feel okay yet?”

I reach out to take my innocent little daughter’s hand in mine. Something really weird is going on because my hand feels like it weighs fifty pounds. I try and calm down my racing thoughts and I do my best to smile and ease her fears. “I’m feeling a hundred percent better, baby. Once I’m all rested up, we can go home.”

That’s when Raymond speaks up. “It looks like you might here for a bit. Your injuries were pretty substantial.”

“Thank you for saving us, Ray. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re very welcome. Do you have anyone Mia can stay with while you’re hospitalized?”

I shake my head, then wince in pain. “I’m not in touch with my parents, we haven’t spoken in years. They’re living on the East Coast now.”

“What about her paternal grandparents?” he asks.

“Her paternal grandmother died a few years ago and her grandfather has similar issues as my husband. I’m not sure I’d want her being around him.” I don’t even mention Ashton, Conrad’s brother, who was lurking on the fringes of our life since before we got married. At the thought of him I have to resist the urge to shudder. Now with Conrad gone, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be safe again.

Ray’s head tilts to the side and he looks at me strangely. “Similar issues as your deceased husband.”

“What happened? How did he die, exactly?” I ask.

Mia is the one who answers. “The police shot him and then they came here and asked me a bunch of questions.”

I freeze in place, trying to imagine my ten-year-old going through all that on her own. “How long have I been unconscious?”

Ray answers, “Two days. I’ve been here with Mia the whole time. Children aren’t really supposed to be here outside of visiting hours, but I talked to the hospital administrator. Since no family stepped up, they agreed to make an exception. They allowed her to stay until you woke up and were able to make arrangements for her care.”

I let that roll around in my head for a few moments before making a decision. “I know this is a big ask, Ray. But would it be possible for you to take her in for a few days, just until I’m on my feet? She goes to school so it would really only be evenings. Hopefully, I’ll be discharged before the weekend.”

He frowns down at me for a second or two before answering. “Prissy girl, you know that I’d do absolutely anything for you, but surely you have friends or family that would make a better caretaker than me?”

“I can’t really discuss it right now, Ray. But I don’t have anyone I trust. It has to be you.” I start to get agitated, the only people I can think of were Conrad’s father and his brother and they were the last people I want near my child. “Seriously, right now, you’re the only person I trust with my child.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You got it, Prissy. I’ll make sure she gets to school, eats three squares a day, and gets a good night’s sleep.”

Mia speaks up, “And I get to visit my mom every day, right?”

Ray glances over at her, smothering back a smile. “Yeah, that goes without saying. Kids need their mothers.”

I relax back into the bed as relief floods my weary brain. “Thank you, Raymond. I’ll make it up to you.”

“No need,” he responds. “I plan to have her work off her keep by baking cookies.”

Mia spins around excitedly and asks, “Chocolate chip cookies from the secret recipe?”

“Of course. We can even add walnuts.”

I look from one to the other, confused about this secret cookie recipe. “What’s this about?”

Ray just shrugs, “Long story, maybe best to save it for another time.”

Mia isn’t having it. She launches into a big, long, drawn-out story about how Ray bought a bunch of cookies that turned out to be amazing. He apparently had a whole pile of them, and they’ve been snacking on them because they’re comfort food and things have been stressful. I honest to goodness fall asleep during her story and wake up to find that I am alone in my hospital room and it’s dark outside.

I’m thoroughly confused about exactly what happened. All I remember is getting back from the grocery store and Conrad had been drinking. The moment I walked into the house, he threw me face first into the wall and started accusing me of sneaking out to see another man. This wasn’t unusual behavior, as he’d started acting really weirdly over the last few months so I just kind of stayed quiet and let him rant.

Mia came home and he began shouting at her for not taking off her shoes at the front door. All he did for hours after that was to pace and rant while not letting us leave the living room. When he pulled a gun out of his safe, I knew our situation was going to get out of hand. Even with all his erratic behavior, he'd never once pulled a weapon on us let alone be physically abusive.

I fall asleep again and that's when the bad dreams creep up on me. That awful night that destroyed me, running away to college to escape the shame. Then finding out I was pregnant, and knowing it had to be my attacker's baby. Of wanting to come home and see if Ray would forgive me. Dreams of being shown a grave with his name on the headstone, of grieving so hard I thought my heart would stop. And after fighting my parents for weeks, being forced into a marriage I didn't want with Conrad. He knew the baby wasn't his as we'd not even had sex. He'd thought it was Ray's, but what he didn't know was that Mia was his brother's. That was a secret I'd take to my grave. If his brother or father even got an inkling that Mia was their blood, then they'd take her away. I wished with all my heart that she was Ray's, if that was the case then my life would have been so much simpler.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:14 am

Rage

Meli and I sit outside The Serpent's Den watching Mia run around playing with her gigantic dog who thinks he's people. When Ven and I became blood brothers I'd thought he'd been joking about having Meli adopt me into the family, but here we are, months later, and I couldn't be happier. I'd never had a family growing up, and even now as an adult it was nice to have someone looking out for me, even if I was capable of looking after myself.

I turn to Meli, "Do you think I'm doing alright by her?"

Gesturing towards Mia, she says, "But of course! Look at her. She is laughing and content in your care. What more could her mother ask for?"

"I suppose you're right. Thanks for breakfast. Her mom wants her back in school right away. Doesn't want her sitting around reliving it all in her head, ya know?"

"Oui, of course that is a wise decision. I'm certain you know she needs a good thérapeute ." Shaking her head as if she forgot the word in English, she adds, "a therapist."

"Yeah, I aware of that. We didn't get to talk much yesterday. Prissy was really tired and kept falling asleep. I plan to visit her after I drop Mia off at school. We've a lot of ground to cover but I have to pace myself. She needs her rest if she's to heal properly."

"Of course this is true. If you need me to keep the child while you work, I will say

yes.”

I smile at her. “Thanks, Meli. If I need you, I’ll call.” Picking up the bag of food she made for us to take to Priscilla, I say, “Thanks for the delicious meal. I’m sure Mia’s mother will be very appreciative. No one likes hospital food after all.”

“ De rien . It was my pleasure.”

Glancing at my watch, I come to my feet. “We should get going. I’m supposed to meet with her principal at ten this morning.”

I shout out to Mia, “Time to leave for school. Say goodbye to Barley.”

When we arrive at school, it’s during class change. Mia seems a bit anxious. Maybe she’s worried that everyone in our small town found out that the cops shot her father who shot her mother. God, what a fucking clusterfuck this turned out to be.

I ask Mia quietly, “Are you okay. If you’re not ready to come back to school, I can talk to your mom about you staying home for a few more days or possibly doing virtual school for the rest of the year. What do you think?”

She glances around. I notice the other kids aren’t making eye contact with her. They’re looking everywhere except at us. Then I see Siege’s two oldest kids, Tommy and Louisa. They’ve got Rider’s daughter, Amy, with them. It occurs to me that they are probably around the same age as Mia. They all clamor around me asking questions, “Why are you here? Where’s Mia been?”

I frown down at them and explain without giving them too much information. “Mia is staying with me because her mom is in the hospital. I hope you’ll be extra nice to her.

If you're all good, I'll give you a croissant on Saturday morning."

Tommy asks excitedly, "And let us play with the dog?"

I give him a single nod because these kids are way too obsessed with Meli's dog. "Yeah, you can play with the dog."

They begin talking about how the dog sits upright in his easy chair like people.

Mia announces, "His name is Barley, and he likes to play fetch."

Suddenly, they don't want to know me and all clamor around Mia. They've all got ten million questions about Barley. On and on they go, right up until the bell rings for the next class.

I tell Mia, "Go on to class. I'm gonna meet with your principal. If we need to talk to you, I'll text you."

Amy gasps, "You have a phone? I want one too."

This morning, I pulled out a burner phone for Mia, just in case her crazy grandfather shows up trying to take her home. I wasn't sure if Priscilla had told me the whole story, I had the feeling there was more to it, but she made it clear that she didn't want her child anywhere near her grandfather or uncle. I pat Amy on the shoulder and tell her, "Just enjoy being kids, Mia needs the phone because her circumstances are different."

"But everyone has a phone," Amy wheedles.

"They do," Tommy adds. His sister just nods.

Damn it, I'm not gonna get into a parenting argument with my club brothers. I hope I haven't started something, instead I just say, "Well none of you have phones, do you?"

All three of them glare at me like I'm public enemy number one, "Ask your parents, but seriously, you don't need a cellphone yet. You're at school all day, if your parents need to get in touch they can call the principal."

"Things are different now," Tommy says, "Not like in the olden days."

I can't help laughing at that, I guess for ten-year-olds I probably am a fossil.

They all tromp off, still pestering Mia with questions, but I can tell by her expression she's happy to be the center of attention for once. My visit with the principal is short and to the point. I give him the number to Priscilla's hospital room, inform him that she has not been declared incompetent and he should direct all his questions to her. Truth be told, he's acting a little odd, so I go ahead and verify what was already printed in the local paper. "Mia's father took her and her mother hostage, shot her mother, and was killed by the police in self-defense. When the SWAT team breached the door, he started shooting at them."

"Are you certain this is what transpired, or did you see it reported in the news? Mr. Whitmore had always been an upstanding citizen."

Giving him a stern look, I tell him point blank, "I was the paramedic on the scene, trying to save her life when the SWAT team came. I saw it with my own eyes."

The principal drops down into his seat, looking stunned. I put my card down on the desk in front of him. "Here's my contact information in case you need it for transportation or anything pertaining to Mia. I'm sure her mother will want to meet with you when she is released from the hospital, just to check up and see how Mia is

handling this whole situation. Be sure you have meaningful information to share with her.”

He nods, still looking a little shell-shocked. I guess it isn't every day that something this extreme happens in our little town, so I can't blame the man for being overwhelmed.

By the time I get to the hospital, Priscilla is sitting up in bed, trying to pick through a fairly unappetizing lunch. “Morning, Prissy girl. How are you feeling?”

She looks up at me, her face still bruised. When she smiles at me, my heart explodes in my chest. I can't let this woman worm her way into my heart and break me all over again, like she did when we were young. I really want to ask her why she up and left me, everything between us had been wonderful. But then I got that letter saying she didn't want anything to do with me. I'd tried to speak to her so many times, but her parents told me she wanted nothing more to do with me. When I heard that she was getting married to some rich dude, that's when I signed up to the military.

Now isn't the time for questions and recriminations, so I decide to help her out in any way I can but this time I'm going to guard my heart. I'd be the world's biggest fool if I let her break my heart twice.

“I brought you something that's actually edible.” Whisking away her tray, I open up the food Meli sent and explain. “Meli's French and owns a fantastic restaurant,” I see Priscilla's face fall.

“Is she your wife?” she asks.

I shake my head, “No she's like my surrogate mother, she's my club brother Venom's

mom and she kind of took me under her wing. I took Mia there this morning for breakfast.”

“Oh wow, I hope she didn’t embarrass you by using the wrong fork.”

I can’t help but laugh. “It’s not that sort of place. Meli doesn’t care about stuff like that. She’s a very down to earth woman.” I slide the food closer to her and watch her eat a few bites.

“This is fantastic. Please thank Meli for me, Ray. This is the best food I’ve had in a very long time.”

“I will. She’ll be thrilled that you enjoyed it. Cooking for others is an obsession for her.”

I give her time to finish her meal and wash it down with some ice water before pulling up a chair and getting right down to the important stuff. I want to know if me and my club brothers need to get involved, I know Conrad is dead, but she’s clearly hiding secrets about the family. “Let’s start with what happened the day you were shot.”

The smile drops off her face. “The police already came and took my statement. They said Conrad started shooting at them when they came crashing through the doors and windows.”

“The police had only one objective and that was to save you and your daughter’s life. Naturally, they would have preferred to arrest him rather than kill him, but he made that impossible.”

She swallows thickly and glances away for a moment before turning back to me. “You protected us, shielding us with your body.”

“My job was to keep the two of you alive until the police could disarm your husband.”

When her expression falls, I add, “Besides, you’ll always be my Prissy girl, my dear friend. You know that I’d take a bullet for anyone I care for.”

“Yeah,” she admits. “You always were a strong protector. Thanks for being there when we needed you the most.”

Obviously back when we were dating, I wasn’t a good enough protector which is why she left me. Or was it because I wasn’t rich? Whatever reason, back then I wasn’t enough. I ignore the insecurities racing through my mind and instead force a smile and say, “You’re welcome. Do you have any questions about your injuries?”

“The doctors explained everything. I remember I was bleeding a lot from the bullet wound and decided the best thing to do was put my finger in there to stop it from bleeding.”

“Yeah, about that. You didn’t stop the bleeding. I did that when I clamped off the bleed. What you did was cause yourself to bleed internally rather than externally.”

She pales at that knowledge, “You must have seen lots of injuries as a paramedic. How bad was the injury?”

“Um, it was pretty bad. You lost a lot of blood. It’s the reason I couldn’t wait on an ambulance.”

She nods, looking worried. “Yes. My doctor said blood loss is why I kept fainting.”

“You had a lot going on that night.”

“Thank God you were there. If not, my daughter would have ended up motherless.”

“Well, she’s accepted being fatherless without much fuss. Why do you think that is?”

She sets her water glass aside and wraps her arms around her stomach, careful to stay away from the wound on her lower chest.

“Conrad wasn’t her real father, and she was very aware of that fact,” she pauses, and I see something flicker across her face. “He was a good man, he wasn’t always like that, but things were difficult. His entire family was difficult. I guess for Mia being out of their grasp is probably a huge relief.”

By the look on Priscilla’s face, she clearly thought it was a huge relief too. “You realize this smooth sailing phase is not going to last, right?”

“I’m well aware of that. If she shows signs of not being able to cope, I’ll find her a counselor.”

“Might I suggest you go ahead and get her one now? There’s no sense waiting until she has problems, I doubt anyone could deal with what happened that night, let alone a kid.”

She nods, staring off over my shoulder. “Yes. Of course. I’ll start calling around.”

“I wanted to mention that you don’t need to worry about your husband’s final arrangements. I was informed that his father claimed his body and already had him cremated.”

“Well, that was fast,” she stammers.

“Normally, in cases of death by cop there’s a delay while they do an internal

investigation. This was done relatively quickly because there were so many eyewitnesses, and he had security footage in the living room and several other rooms.”

Her eyes fly open. “I didn’t know that. I had cameras in my own home?”

“I’m told they were hidden. It made me wonder if your husband even knew they were there. He was acting all kinds of crazy while they were capturing every single thing he said and did.”

Priscilla starts wringing her hands. “I can’t imagine anyone else who would want to spy on us.”

“Your father-in-law crossed my mind as a potential suspect. He would have had a vested interest in monitoring his son, probably hoping to avoid him escalating like he did that night. Your husband’s father actually owns the home you were living in. He was also giving your husband a monthly stipend.”

“What?” she just shakes her head. “That’s unbelievable.”

“You have any idea why he would do that? What about the other brother?”

She pales and looks nervously at her hands, “I’m not sure. The whole family dynamic is strange.”

“I had our IT guy, research details about the house deeds and inheritance and there doesn’t seem to be anything in your husband’s name to be inherited, no community property whatsoever.”

“All I know is that he was in his home office all day long. He told me not to bother him because he was working, Sometimes, he left the house, saying he had to meet

with clients.”

“Let me guess,” I told her. “He always came back rip roaring drunk, right?”

Her expression turns haunted. “Not at first, but over the last year. It started when...” her voice trails off.

“What?” I ask.

“It all seemed to start around the time his brother got out.”

Nothing had turned up on our search about the family, “Got out of where?”

“He was in a rehabilitation center for nine years. I’m not sure exactly what was wrong with him. All I know is that when he was inside, Conrad seemed much happier. But when he was released eleven months ago, that’s when Conrad started drinking. I think he drank in his office off and on as well.”

I feel so fucking sorry for everything she’s been through, but I need her to know the rest. “Our club attorney, Smoke, searched state and county records. He didn’t find a business license registered in Conrad’s name, nor was he paying employment taxes. That pretty much means he was living off Daddy’s money.”

“If that’s true, it means I need to get job right away. Mia has extracurriculars and trips planned for this year.”

“Don’t worry about all that. We’ll get through it, and you can pay me back later, when you’re on your feet and earning a decent income.”

She seems bewildered for a brief second and then her expression clears. “Is there anything else I should know about?”

“I met with Mia’s principal this morning and gave him your number. He’ll call you first if anything comes up regarding Mia.”

She reaches out to touch my hand. “Thank you for that. How did things go with the other kids? They aren’t ostracizing her, are they?”

“I can’t speak for all the kids that go to her school, but my club brothers have kids that are around Mia’s age, and they seemed to be bonding when I left her. I’ll keep my eyeballs peeled for anything out of the ordinary.”

She lies back on her pillow and her hand slips from mine. “This is all much more than I bargained for.”

I try to lift her spirits by reminding her of when we were kids. “Remember when our fifth-grade teacher told us how to eat an elephant?”

Her expression brightens. “A bite at a time.”

“Exactly, I tell her. “We’ll just break this gigantic multi-faceted problem apart and solve it a piece at a time.”

We chat for a while longer and then I take my leave of her. She needs her sleep, and I need some alone time to get my head straight. Seeing the one and only woman I ever loved again is messing with my head. Seeing her desperation and joy at me showing up in this moment is enough to stoke all those old feelings into an inferno. I’m still dead set against getting into a romantic relationship with her again, even if she wanted me. However, I’m curious about what happened to the fabulously wealthy lifestyle this man was supposed to provide for her. It seems they had all the outward trappings of wealth, but Conrad’s father actually owned everything of value in their lives. I decide to look into that some more and try to figure out why that was.

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Priscilla

Two Weeks Later

I can't believe that I've been cut off, abruptly and permanently from support by my deceased husband's father. After suffering for ten long years with this man, I don't get any kind of support whatsoever. The worst part is, there is nothing I can do about it, though truthfully, we are better cut off from that family. Conrad and his father had known all along that Mia wasn't their blood. I couldn't tell them the truth, that she was their blood, because then I would have to reveal what had happened with Ashton. The fact that once I was married to Conrad he backed off, was enough. So I allowed them to believe that the baby was Ray's, I was forced to sign a prenup acknowledging that I came to him four months pregnant by another man. At the time, they told me not to worry, that Conrad would treat her like his own daughter and the family would welcome her with open arms. They kept their word about being good to Mia. It was me his family had a problem with. The bottom line is, there will be no child support forthcoming. And there are no marital assets because nothing of value was in Conrad's name. I should have paid more attention to our finances but anytime I asked questions, Conrad always told me not to worry, that it was being taken care of.

That means it's up to me to recover fast and step up to provide for my daughter. Sitting here with my discharge instructions in hand, I feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders. I need to suck it up and get my ass in gear because my daughter needs me. I can't let her see me as weak and depressed. Therefore, I muscle fears for our future down and lock my worries away in a little box in the back of my mind. Waiting to leave is the hardest part because it's hard not to start worrying again.

When Raymond and Mia show up, they're all smiles, rainbows, and sunshine. It lifts my spirits a little. When Mia moves in for a hug, I gaze over her shoulder at Ray. He was seriously hot when we dated in high school. Now that he's fully grown, he's even more attractive. He's always had broad shoulders, but now he's packed on the muscle. I'm still having trouble believing he's back after thinking he was dead for so long. If he was alive all along, then why didn't he contact me? I haven't broached the subject with him even though I have a million questions. It's like we're tiptoeing over the past.

"What's the plan today, Prissy?"

It stabs at my heart that he still calls me by the nickname he tagged me with all those years ago. I hold up my discharge paperwork, "I've officially been discharged but I need to pick up a few medications."

"Are you up for getting a bite to eat," Ray asks.

I give him a quick smile. "Only always. I've been craving a burger and some fries after this healthy hospital food."

He grins down at me. "You should have said. I'd have brought you that."

I shrug, "Fries are only good for a few minutes. They're always crappy take out and never warm up very well."

He replies chipperly, "You are not wrong about that. Let's get you packed up and outta this miserable excuse for a rejuvenating spa resort."

I smile at his enthusiasm and Mia giggles. She likes his sense of humor, and I just like him full stop. If I'm honest, those old feelings never died. They always say if the person you love dies then the love never does, it just changes. That happened over the

years, but now he's here again I feel the old pull. But as he's been nothing but friendly with me, I lock my heart down and slap a smile on my face, because this man does not deserve my angst. He's the one doing us a gigantic favor by taking us in until I can get back on my feet.

When the nurse comes to take me down in a wheelchair, she calls Raymond a different name, Rage. And she flirts shamelessly with him. Although he doesn't encourage her by any stretch of the imagination, he doesn't shut her down either. That shouldn't bother me, that this gorgeous single man has women chasing after him, but it does. It bothers me a lot. That feeling I'm experiencing is jealousy. I quickly realize that I'm experiencing a lot of big emotions where this man is concerned, where there used to be only grief.

Once I'm settled in his truck he closes the door. The window is cracked open, and I can hear every word they're saying.

She says, "The last time I texted you, I didn't get an answer."

He runs his hand through his hair before answering her. "I've been busy, Mariam. I have a lot on my plate right now."

"So, you had no time in the last six weeks to get back to me?"

"Look," he replies. "I know you're looking for a relationship."

"What's wrong with that? We were good together," she says and places her hand on his shoulder.

He shifts away, "We spent the weekend together. It'd be weird to make long term plans off one weekend together."

“I’m not suggesting that we get engaged. I just think you should give me a chance. I’m a nice person. It could lead to something wonderful.”

“I’m not looking for anything wonderful, with you or anybody else. I’ve had enough heartbreak to realize that relationships never work out the way you think they’re going to. Marriage and babies are not for me.”

“Then what they say is true, that you never see the same woman twice.”

Raymond’s voice turns exasperated. “I wouldn’t go that far. You got a whole weekend. I’m not looking to get tied down, not now, not ever.”

“Is that it or are you catching feelings for this one?”

“Hell no,” he responds hotly. “I’m absolutely not having a relationship with Priscilla. Don’t even go there.”

“We both know you’re nursing a huge hero complex. She’s the one you saved from her crazy husband, right?”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be talking about your patient that way, Mariam.”

“God, I’m not talking about her medical issues, only what everybody already knows from watching the news.”

I cringe on the inside because my daughter has been listening to this whole conversation as well.

When Ray jumps into the truck and starts the ignition, it’s like the conversation outside never happened. He’s talking about taking us to best restaurant in town. Mia asks excitedly, “The one with Barley?”

“Yes. That’s the place. I think your mom is going to like it far more than a hamburger.”

They’re both positive and upbeat as they talk back and forth.

Me? I’m still digesting what I heard. If I thought there was a chance that Ray and I could pick up where we left off then I was mistaken. He’s not the settling down type. Not only that, but he’s got beautiful women throwing themselves at him, he doesn’t need me. And he’s nice to Mia because she’s not his.

His words reverberate through my head, Hell no ... I’m absolutely not having a relationship with Priscilla. Don’t even go there.

He seemed almost insulted that she would think he could be romantically interested in the woman I’ve become. It hurt to think he was being nice to me because he felt sorry for me, but that’s the reality of my situation. The old Ray is gone, we’re like strangers now and I need to stop thinking we can reignite what we once had. I need to work on getting better so I can stop relying on his charity.

I do want to understand what happened all those years ago, though. Why did my parents tell me he was dead? I know they didn’t like him, but lying about his death was a bridge to far. Though I saw his gravestone with my own eyes, why would he have one if he wasn’t dead? Maybe my parents honestly thought he had died?

I want to take a trip to that cemetery and visit the grave site. At the time I was too distraught to pay close attention to his headstone, I want to see if I missed some small detail that would have alerted me it was fake. I want to see if it’s actually there or if it’s something I imagined in my grief. I was a mess back then, not just about Ray, but with what happened with Ashton just before Ray died. If I had to choose a point where my life fell apart, then it would be that night. Looking into the rear-view mirror, I watch Mia all happy and content, playing on the new phone that Ray—or

Rage as that nurse called him—got for her. I'm going to ask him about the name thing. I'm curious why he would have gotten tagged with such an unpleasant nickname.

As Ray's vehicle bounces along, he reaches over to turn on some country music. As Johnny Cash's voice came out the speakers, I smile. While so much has happened over the last eleven years, some things never changed.

After hearing the conversation Ray had with the nurse, part of me just wanted to go home, crawl into bed, and sleep. I was exhausted, both mentally and physically, but he seemed really excited about taking me to this place, so I shook off the blues. I'd had two weeks laying on my back to rest, so I sat back and enjoyed the ride. We were headed to the coast, and as soon as I glimpsed the ocean, I could feel my mood lift. There's something about the calming water that always makes me happy.

He turns onto a winding road, and we end up pulling into the parking lot of a super-sweet little restaurant. It's surrounded by trees and flowers. There's something so quaint and old world about it. The Serpent's Den , the sign over the door reads. It seems a funny name for a place like this, but I smile none the less. The moment we pull in, a small woman with long, light brown hair and a floral dress comes running out with a huge smile on her face, and she's followed by a large sandy-colored dog. This lovely woman is so nice and well put together that I feel like a swamp creature by comparison. I haven't been able to do my hair properly or put make-up on since the day of the shooting, the day I lost my whole life. Granted it wasn't a life I really wanted or enjoyed but it was the one I was living. Having it all ripped away had only one saving grace, Conrad was no longer there to harass us morning, noon and night and I was no longer under the control of his family. That in and of itself was a godsend.

“Hello, I’m Meli, you must be Priscilla,” she says. Her voice is musical, and her French accent makes anything she says sound like poetry.

I reach out to shake her hand, “Nice to meet you,” I say politely.

“I am sure you would prefer to be in bed, but Rage always insists he knows best,” she says lightly, flashing a look in Ray’s direction. Or Rage, I guess if even his semi-adoptive mother calls him that, then it must be the name he uses now.

“She’s been stuck in a hospital bed for days, I thought she needed some fresh air,” he says.

“Hey, she is sitting right here and can speak for herself,” I say. I’m not really angry, but I do want to get out of the truck. It’s embarrassing to realize, but I’m going to need some help.

“ Bof , Rage, help the lady now,” Meli orders.

Rage obediently opens my door and helps me out. Once I’m standing, I take a better look around, it’s like a fairytale cottage. Mia jumps out behind me with amazing agility and runs off to greet the dog she talks about constantly. She happily follows along behind us and plops down at the only open spot at a four top table once we’ve all sat down. Meli yells something in French and out comes a server with a tray full of drinks. They’re all little glass bottles with hinged tops in an oval bucket of ice. The liquid inside is all pretty pastel colors. Mia takes a clear one with bubbles. When I hesitate, Meli explains, “They’re all different kinds of fruit juice.”

Mia holds up hers. “Honeydew melon, carbonated. It’s the best one. You should try it.”

I lean over to take a bottle, the movement pulls at my stitches and I wince. Ray

quickly plucks one out and hands it to me, our fingers brushing for a moment.

I don't know why but I blush as I take it from him. I look away, hoping he doesn't notice. I find myself face-to-face with Meli and boy does she notice everything. First a ghost of a smile jumps onto her face, then Mia says something that draws her notice and when she looks from Mia to Ray, she freezes. I catch her looking from one to the other and realize that although Ray may be oblivious, this woman is not. She sees what I saw when I saw them together for the first time. But it can't be true. She pulls out her napkin and whispers, " Oh mon Dieu ."

"Meli, are you okay?"

She nods without looking up.

He reaches out to touch her arm. "Are you sure. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No ghost. Excuse me, I will be back in one moment." My heart sinks when she jumps to her feet and darts away through a doorway marked toilettes .

Ray looks at me and says, "There must be something going around, are you okay? You're a little pale."

I unhinge the lid and take a long refreshing drink of the melon spritzer trying to distract myself from Meli's sudden disappearance. I find that it's totally the most delicious drink I've ever tasted. Wonderful enough so that I want to drink it on the regular. Placing the bottle back on the table I look around, Meli is still in the restroom. I need to talk to her, I'm not sure what she's thinking but she's wrong. No matter how much I want it to be right.

Ray and Mia talk about their favorite dishes and draw me into their conversation as they look at the menu. I have no clue what they're talking about, so I tell Mia to pick

something for me. While she's happily perusing the menu, I realize that Ray is staring at me. It's the perfect time to ask him about the name thing.

"Do you mind if I ask why that nurse at the hospital called you Rage?"

Of course, Mia answers the question for him. "Ray joined and MC and his club name is Rage."

I'm a little taken aback. I remember him loving to ride motorcycles but never took him for the type of man to join a gang. Again, it's none of my business, so I don't ask. But I can't let it go in my mind and speculate that he must have been filled with rage at some point to have taken that nickname. I don't know enough about this man's life to understand what he would have been enraged about.

My mind begins to fill with scenarios to explain the name, things that might have happened in the years since we were together. Maybe he lost someone close to him, like a wife. Or he was injured and lost some bodily movement. If that's the case he's recovered nicely. Oh God, I hope he didn't lose a child. That would be horrific.

Ray comments, "I wonder what's taking Meli so long?"

Mia starts to get up. "I can check on her."

I reach out and touch her arm. "No, I'll check on her. I have to go to the restroom anyway."

Ray takes another drink of his juice and responds, "Yeah, Mia. Let your mom go. You might have to help me wrangle the dog out of the restaurant again. You know how he is."

My daughter's voice turns serious. "It's because people feed him scraps. And that

dog has a name. Calling him dog is disrespectful. It's like calling you guy or man."

Ray just shrugs. "I'll answer to anything but an obscenity."

It's both heartwarming and heartbreaking to see the easy interaction they have with each other. Heartbreaking, because I know once I'm healed then we'll probably not see one another again. I get to my feet and head back to the restroom. I find Meli standing in front of the mirror with both hands resting on the sink.

I don't really know how to start the conversation, so I ask, "Is everything okay?"

Her head slowly lifts, and she looks over at me. Her expression is something approaching tragic. "It's all you. You're the reason he is called Rage."

I step back and lean against the doorframe shaking my head. "What do you mean?"

"You were the one who broke his heart. He was so angry for so long, always raging about how unfair the world was. This was your doing."

I just keep shaking my head. She can't be right. There is no way. "No, you've got it all wrong."

"I do not think I so." Pointing at her eye, she says, "I have eyes that see. That sweet daughter of yours looks like Rage. The thick brown hair, the green eyes. They are the same."

My mind flails wildly, groping to come up with something to explain this situation. She's mistaken, I know what she sees, but it's not true. "No, that's not true. She looks like her father..." I stop suddenly as an image of her father crosses my mind. His face contorted with anger. "If you think she looks like Rage you need to know it's just a coincidence."

Taking a step closer to me, she searches my face. Whatever she's looking for, she doesn't find it. "You lie, I think," she says suspiciously, then adds, "Either to Rage or to yourself."

I start to break down. "We were childhood sweethearts. He didn't want me all those years ago and he doesn't want me now."

"How could you know this? You cannot read his mind."

"I know he doesn't want me because he said it out loud today. He's not the settling down type and doesn't want to be trapped by a wife or children."

She still looks doubtful.

Exasperated, I tell her, "I can't make him want me. Forcing him will just make him hate us."

"Yet, you are with him now."

"I have no place to go, and Rage is a nice man, who's taking us in. I only accepted because of my daughter. I'm going to get on my feet fast and get a job. We'll be out long before we wear out our welcome."

"Very well, ma petite . I will have my eyes on you. You will not break his heart again. Am I clear?"

"Yes, of course," I stammer. "I'll be gone before you know it."

"We shall see if all you say comes to pass," she says as she splashes water on her face. She looks up and our eyes meet in the mirror, "And that little girl? I see, even if you don't."

I shake my head sadly. She's mistaken.

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Rage

Lunch is really uncomfortable and I'm not quite sure why. When Meli and Priscilla come back from the restroom, they're visibly upset. I know better than to act like a bull in a china shop though, so I do my best to keep the conversation ball rolling. After lunch Mia goes outside to play with Barley, and I take Priscilla for a walk around the property. I had planned to show her around, there's a lot of land attached to the restaurant. My club brother Venom is building a home on a parcel of land near the coast and the whole area is so beautiful, but I also want a chance to talk to her alone because she looks like she's barely holding it together.

I take her down the winding sidewalk into Meli's rose garden and we sit on a bench. I roll right into the conversation I want to have because there is no use putting it off. "Were you able to tell what was bothering Meli? I've never seen her act that way."

Priscilla freezes and a long silence spins out between the two of us. Just when I think she isn't going to answer me, she speaks. "She figured out I was the one who broke your heart all those years ago and was worried that I was trying to get my claws in you again."

"Oh shit," I tell her. "Don't worry. I'll talk to her about that. That shit's ancient history. There's no use bringing it up now."

"I want to explain—"

I hold up one hand, silencing her. "No need. Like I said, it's ancient history."

Her head spins around to look at me, her expression is shocked. “You really don’t care what happened?”

I fucking know what happened. She spelled it out pretty clearly in her Dear John letter. I wasn’t up for getting raked over the coals hearing it all again. I may be a strong man, but Priscilla was, is, and always will be, my one weakness. So, I look her right in the eyes and tell her, “No. I don’t want to rehash all that. We’ve both moved on, so there’s nothing to be gained from going over old history. I bump shoulders with her gently. “Let’s just leave the past in the past and live in the now where we can at least still be friends, okay?”

She tears up but manages to hold back the waterworks as she nods, “Yeah, sure. If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” I say firmly. She seems really upset by that, and I don’t have a clue why. I’m giving her a pass on her past behavior for fuck’s sake, surely she’d be pleased? Trying to lighten the mood I ask, “Now, let’s get started talking about what you need right now.”

Her eyes got big. “Besides my getting my prescriptions filled, I don’t need anything.” Glancing out at her daughter who’s playing on the grass with Barley, she adds, “I’m already so grateful for the new clothing and stuff you bought for Mia. I wouldn’t feel right having you spend your hard-earned money on me.”

This woman is breaking my heart. I wonder if she doesn’t want me to spend money on her because she thinks I’ll expect something she’s not willing to give in return, or because she was so used to living with her abusive stingy-ass husband for so long that she doesn’t think she deserves nice things. Or maybe she feels guilty for running out on me to marry that rich asshole. I shake that thought away, I need to stop feeling so angry all the time. I jump to my feet and hold out one hand, “That settles it, we’re going shopping.”

“No, really. I’m fine,” she tells me earnestly.

The more reluctant she is to spend my money, the more eager I am to spoil her. I told Mariam I wasn’t looking for a relationship and there was nothing between Priscilla and me. I might have believed my words, but you can’t just turn on and off feelings and the more I was around her, the more I was starting to feel that old need.

I need to shut that shit back down, but in the meantime, I have a woman here who’d had an unbelievably shitty time of it over the past however long. She needed a treat, “Look, Prissy. The only thing you have are the clothes on your back and those were donated by my club’s old ladies. You need more than a couple of outfits. Your asshole of a father-in-law isn’t letting you back in your house. It’s going to take us petitioning the court to get in there and remove your belongings. Our club attorney is working on that now, by the way.”

“I don’t want to spend your money,” she says carefully.

I squat down in front of her to explain. “Want to know what happens after you’ve been through a childhood filled with abuse, lose the love of your life early, and end up seeing active duty on the battlefield all before you’re twenty-four?”

She shakes her head, with her lips pressed together as if she’s afraid of offending me by speaking.

I bring one hand up and rest it on her leg. “You stay busy by working three jobs to keep you from ruminating over it all. For the last eleven years I’ve been keeping myself busy with work. I work so much, I don’t have the time or energy to spend it.”

Grabbing her hand, I say, “Come on, Prissy girl. Let’s dip into my savings account. I might even let you help me pick out something cool for myself.”

A small smile jumps onto her face as she looks me up and down. “I’ve actually got some good ideas for giving you a styling aesthetic.

“As long as it doesn’t get in the way of me riding a bike or being a first responder, I’m probably gonna love it. Let’s face it, when it comes to clothing, you have good style.” The truth was that I don’t give a good goddamn about styling or buying shit for myself. What I care about making sure Priscilla has what she needed to function as a human being. I need her to be alert and present for her child, rather than falling into a pit of despair because her shitty husband shot her, wound up dead, and had screwed her out of her marital home by putting everything in his father’s name.

Standing here looking down at her, that seems like a tall order. I hold out my hand again and she reluctantly slides her hand in mine. Her other hand goes to the still healing wound on her belly. “I’m not sure how much walking I can do, but I’ll try to keep up.”

I tug her closer and wrap my arm around her back. “Don’t you worry about that. I’m taking you to a boutique, it’s one my club brothers sometimes use for their old ladies. All you have to do is sit. I’ll even model all the outfits for you if that’s too much effort.”

She bursts out laughing and stops just as abruptly with a wince. “Don’t make me laugh I might split my stitches.”

I can’t keep the smile off my face for anything. Finally having my Priscilla back, even as a friend, is the best thing ever.

“I was thinking of taking Priscilla shopping for supplies. Would it be possible for Mia to hang out with you?” I ask Meli.

Meli’s the closest thing I have to a mom. Me and her son, Venom, took a blood

brother oath a few months ago. At the time it was just a silly thing, but I really appreciated the thought. Turns out Ven took it seriously, as did his mom who always wanted more kids, so since then I've been treated as a member of the family. She seems to really like Mia, so she jumps at the chance. Turning to Mia, she says, "If you stay, we can bake cookies, just like you wanted."

"Yay! Cookies!" Mia says excitedly. Then she bends down and claps her hand for Barley to come to her. "Did you hear that, Barley. I'm staying the whole day, and we get cookies."

"No cookies for Barley," Meli says.

Mia's face falls, "But he loves cookies, he told me so."

"Maybe we can make him some special dog cookies then," Meli grins as she scratches the top of Barley's head.

"Watch it," I tease. "If you're not careful, Meli will put you to work in the restaurant."

Meli just laughs, "Maybe someday, when she is older, she can wait tables, my Serp did that at weekends."

Mia gleefully tells Barley, "Did you hear that, boy. I landed my first job too."

Priscilla is all smiles when we leave. Clearly, she trusts Meli with her daughter.

I help get Priscilla settled in the passenger side of my truck because I don't want her climbing up unaided. After making sure she's okay I get in and start the engine before explaining, "Over the last two weeks, I've taken Mia out to Meli's restaurant several times. Mia loves it there. She's even taken to cutting flowers and creating little mini

flower arrangements. She gives them away and decorates her room with them.”

“She has a room at your house?” Priscilla says in a surprised voice.

“Of course. What did you think I was doing, locking her in the attic?”

“Well no. Naturally, you would put her in your guest room.” Blushing all over again, she mumbles, “I don’t know what I was thinking. To be honest, I’ve been thinking of us as homeless.”

“Don’t be silly, woman. You’re going to stay at my place until you’re back on your feet—however long you need. It’s a little out of the way cottage down a dirt road that leads to nowhere. You’re going to love it.”

She perks up. “I’ve never lived in the country, it sounds a bit isolated.”

“Well, it’s not that isolated,” I tell her with a mischievous grin, “besides me, there are bears, coyotes, and wildcats.”

“Oh okay, you’re scaring me now. Why would you pick such an out of the way location?”

The curiosity in her voice is all kinds of cute. Priscilla’s most certainly a city girl and I’m pretty sure she’ll want to get back to it as soon as possible after she heals up. I decide to tell her the story of how I ended up with my home. “The house originally belonged to my neighbor. He was an older man with no family. After getting called out to his place one time when he fell and broke his hip, I started stopping by every day to check on him after he got out of hospital.”

“Oh, that was really sweet of you. I’m sure he appreciated the help.”

“Actually, it was my fucking honor to know him. He was a retired Purple Heart veteran and had traveled the world back in the day.” Taking a deep breath, I continue, “You’re right though. He did appreciate me coming to check on him and making sure he got to his medical appointments and got his prescriptions filled. We used to sit out on the porch and talk for hours. I really miss Gerald. Since he didn’t have anyone, he left everything to me, including his house. I could have sold it, but I decided to keep it because it reminds me of him and the stories he would tell.”

Priscilla immediately chimes in, “I am so sorry you lost your friend. There is no kind of pain like grieving.”

There’s something in her voice and I wonder who she lost, though maybe she’s referring to her husband? I don’t know what things were like between then, “I know Conrad was a real asshole. Does some small part of you miss him.”

She turns to look out the window and takes a few minutes to organize her thoughts. “With Conrad, it’s complicated. He wasn’t always bad.”

“Yeah, you never really know what someone’s capable of. You think you know their limits right up until they pull the rug out from under you.”

She turns to me and nods. “You’re not wrong about that.”

“It’s hard to grieve over the person who tried to kill you, right?”

She nods and wrings her hands in her lap. “Yeah, that’s about the size of it. I didn’t love him and don’t feel grief so much as relief that it’s all finally over and I’m away from that family.”

Her story really drags out all my protective instincts all over again. I want to ask why she didn’t reach out to me. She has to know that I would have moved heaven and

earth to get her out of there. I don't ask though because I don't want us to get mired down in the sins of our past. She didn't want me. I shouldn't be worried about why she didn't call me when things went bad with her marriage. "Any idea why your parents had their hearts set on an asshole like Conrad for you to marry?"

She takes a deep breath and says, "It was because his family was wealthy. For the duration of our marriage my parents got a hefty stipend from his family."

That doesn't make a bit of sense to me. "Why would your parents have needed that money? They were wealthy in their own right."

"No, they really weren't. By the time I was starting high school, my mother discovered that my father had a gambling problem. He'd taken out a second mortgage on our house, our cars all had loans against them and his business was slowly failing."

"Fucking hell, they practically sold you to that bastard."

When she doesn't respond, I know that I've taken this conversation too far, so I apologize. "I'm really sorry, Priscilla. I didn't mean to rake up so many bad memories for you today."

She turns to look out the window again, "The memories are always there, Ray, no matter whether or not I talk about them. So, don't be worried on that accord."

I reach over and cover her hands with mine. "For the rest of the day, we're not going to talk about the past, only the present and future. How does that sound?"

She puts her free hand on top mine and gives me a wary smile, "That actually sounds fantastic. I feel like I've been on an emotional rollercoaster the last couple of weeks."

We manage to stay off touchy subjects for the rest of the journey and by the time we reach Las Salinas, Priscilla has a genuine smile on her face. I pull into Francesca's Boutique. I park up and help her out the truck again, enjoying the feel of her arm around my waist.

When I put her down on her feet, she holds my arm with both hands for a moment to stabilize herself. I like the way she clings to me too much and am far too disappointed when her hands slip away.

She looks up at the sign, and reads it out, "Francesca's Boutique, Hair and Nail Salon." Turning to me she grins, "Sounds like a one stop shop, right?"

"Yeah, it is. Trust me, this is just your kind of place, Prissy."

Her indulgent smile made me feel things I shouldn't ought to feel. This was the woman who ran out on me all those years ago. She let her family pressure her into marrying another man because his family was rich. I'd pinned all my hopes on marrying Priscilla and creating the loving family I never had, but it exploded in my face.

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Priscilla

The moment we enter the boutique, the woman behind the counter lights up, “Rage, where have you been hiding your sexy self?”

The last sentence was said while side-eyeing me. I know my face falls because I realize this is what hanging out with Rage is going to be like, every beautiful female falling all over him, flirting her ass off and trying to hook up with him. I have no right to feel any kind of way about this situation, yet I do.

I physically turn away, spotting a chair nearby and make my way to it to let them flirt in peace. Rage stays right by my side and the moment I sit down he pops a squat beside me, his face smiling and happy. He leans over and whispers in my ear. “She’s not trying to make you uncomfortable.” Jerking his chin to the left, he adds, “She’s trying her best to make him jealous.”

I glance over to find a skinny man with beady eyes and a pencil protector in his shirt pocket flipping through a rack of clothing. He sneaks a quick glance at the woman and becomes visibly alarmed to see her standing in the middle of the floor staring at him. He jerks back, turns on his heel and literally goes running out the door. It’s seriously the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.

The woman makes her way back over to us and the first words out of Rage’s mouth are “Why do you always pick the really strange ones to fall in love with? If I didn’t know better, Frankie, I’d almost think you didn’t like yourself very much.”

She just shrugs irritably and replies, “Socially awkward men need love too, he’s

really sweet when you get to know him.” I see her eyes turn to look out the window. The strange man is literally standing in the store’s big picture window, looking at her.

I get that they think the guy’s socially awkward, but I’m thinking he’s serial killer weird. After being married to Conrad and knowing his dysfunctional family, I’m good at picking up the maladaptive kind of weird. I don’t say that, though. It would be rude to yuck another woman’s yum.

When the guy smiles oddly and goes running off again, Francesca turns back to us. “What can I get for you today, Rage? It’s not like you to come in here.” The flirtatiousness is gone from her voice and she’s all business.

Rage comes to his feet. “My friend just got out of the hospital. She needs the works.”

The woman’s eyes light up for a second before she frowns. “Can do, we’re quiet today, but maybe next time call first? Our masseuse isn’t here today, so it won’t be the full works.”

Rage’s voice falters for a second. “I don’t make a habit of collecting injured women, this is a one-off special I told you, she just got out of the hospital. The last thing she needs is a masseuse.”

I speak up, “I’m not sure how good I’ll be at trying on clothing. I’m still a bit sore.”

Francesca gives me a broad smile, “Don’t worry sweetheart, I can help with that, or even try on stuff if you want? We’re a similar size. But what say, we start with your hair? I know how good a new hairstyle can make a woman feel.”

My hand goes up to smooth my pale blonde hair back. It’s gotten to be dull and lifeless in the last few years, likely from stress. It’s just another reminder that I’m not presenting at my best when I most want to look nice.

When my hand drops to my side, Rage takes hold of it and tugs me to my feet. Before I know it, we're in an adjoining room on the far end of the boutique. It's a small, posh three-seat beauty salon. I slide into the seat as Francesca talks to the hair stylist. The three of us talk a little bit about what I want my hair to look like as Rage drops down into one of the spare seats. It looks like it's a slow day for the salon because we're the only customers.

The stylist makes short work of cutting, coloring, and styling my hair. By the time she's finished, I look more like my old self. The shoulder-length honey blonde is that hint of warmth my complexion needs to not look so washed out.

Next, I take a turn getting my nails done. Since my nails are long, they just need shaped and painted. The nail tech is finished in about fifteen minutes. Next is a small counter with a famous brand of makeup for sale. Francesca's skills really shine when it comes to customizing a color palette. By the time she's finished, I look better than I have in years, and she gathers my products and puts them into a little bag along with perfume samples.

I glance over to find Rage has turned into a thumb warrior on his phone. He looks so handsome when he's deep in concentration. To think I could have been with him this whole time if only I hadn't let my parents manipulate me into thinking he was dead. I was young and foolish.

I have to admit that I'm kind of running out of steam when it comes to picking clothing and I might have to take up Francesca's offer of having her model the outfits for me. Rage is suddenly interested and comes to sit beside me. I ask for dress clothes that I can go to an interview in, and Francesca comes back moments later in a cute little pink suit. It looks adorable on her, but I shake my head and ask, "Do you have it in black."

"If course, it's our best seller."

When she comes back out, I love the look. Rage can tell. He says, “Bag it and let’s see a couple more outfits.”

Before long we’ve picked out four work outfits that I can mix and match. Then out comes the jeans, sweaters, and casual tops. By the time all’s said and done I have ten outfits and underthings.

All-in-all, it’s been a fantastic haul and despite my misgivings this morning, it hasn’t been too tiring. At the end of our excursion, Rage slips Francesca his credit card and I can’t tell how much the whole thing costs because she doesn’t tell him, and he distracts me before the total comes up on the register. He carries all the bags in one hand and places the other around my waist to keep me steady.

He carefully places all my bags behind the passenger side seat, helps me into the seat and buckles me in, careful to place the strap above my wound.

We pull out of the parking lot and head towards town, rather than to pick up Mia from Meli’s place. I’m dreading going into another store but realize that’s not what he has in mind when he pulls into the pick-up space at our local big box electronic store. Rage texts on his cellphone and someone runs out moments later with several bags.

After that we finally head back to pick Mia up. Rage is so chatty that I somehow manage to stay awake the whole way. My daughter jumps into the back seat and begins pawing through my bags excitedly.

Mia comments, “Oh, you got electronics too.”

“Out of your mother’s bags, Mia. You’re too curious for your own good.”

She just laughs at his mild rebuke. “You’re right. I have to know everything about

everything.”

Once we got to Rage’s house I was overcome with tiredness, so he led me to a room, and I pretty much instantly fell asleep fully clothed. I wake up in what is obviously Rage’s second guest bedroom. He described his house as a small cottage, but this room is rather large. How long I’ve been sleeping is unclear in my mind, but I vaguely remember Rage waking me up to take my meds at some point. My head hurts. It feels like a caffeine withdrawal headache. Suddenly, I want nothing more than a good, hot cup of coffee.

I get out of bed and change out of my creased clothes and pull on a pair of yoga pants and a t-shirt from one of my shopping bags. I’d really love a shower, but coffee and something to eat are a higher priority. Slipping out of my room, I begin looking for the kitchen. I only have to follow my nose because I can smell bacon and fresh coffee. When I get close, I can hear that Rage and Mia are talking about cookies.

“No, you’re not supposed to smash them down with a fork. You’re supposed to roll them into a fist size ball and then tear the ball in two and put it on the cookie sheet rough side up.”

“That’s sounds like one hell of a cookie, kid.”

“Meli said we have to lower the oven temperature to three hundred or they won’t cook all the way through.”

“Well as Meli is the world’s best cookie baker, so I’m sure she’s giving you good advice.”

“Damn straight she is, “Mia says enthusiastically. “The cookies we made were the

best damn cookies I've ever tasted."

"You know something, Mia. I don't think your mom would approve of your cursing when she's not around."

"You're supposed to be my role model, and you curse, like all the time. It can't be bad if you do it."

Rage chokes out, "I'll make you a deal. I won't curse if you don't. Then your mom doesn't have to feel bad having you around a bad influence like me. How does that sound?"

Mia hesitates, "Yeah, that's good. But you really think my mom feels bad when we curse?"

"Look, kid. I don't know. I've never lived with a little girl before, so I'm just winging it here, but I know your mom won't be thanking me if you end up cussing like a sailor."

I walk into the room and answer the question they seem to be agonizing over. "I would feel bad if you grew up thinking it was okay for kids to curse. That's not okay. When you're all grown up, you get to decide a lot of things for yourself. One is whether or not you want to curse. Until then, let's keep our language PG, okay?"

Mia is sitting at the table with a drawing pad and a huge pencil with pretty pink feathers attached to the top. She nods, "Okay Mommy. I don't want you to feel bad over the things I do."

"Well, I'm responsible for how I feel, so don't worry about that. Just try your best to be a good person and let everything else take care of itself."

“I poured you coffee, Prissy. How do you take your morning brew?”

“One sugar and two creamers. I’ll get it though. I can see you have your hands full this morning.”

“Thanks. Beware of Boots. He’s old and cranky in the morning.”

I glance up to where he’s gesturing to see a black and white tuxedo cat sitting in a kitchen chair beside Mia. He meows, but the sound is ragged and loud, like he’s angry.

Mia reaches over and eases a small saucer of fancy cat food to his face. He leans over and begins to eat.

“Do you always feed him at the table?” I ask.

“He’s always sat in that particular seat to eat his food. Don’t blame me. Gerald got him started with that when he was young. Now, he won’t eat anywhere else.”

Mia adds gleefully, “Look Mommy, he has a special chair.”

Rage explains, “Gerald hand built it to be the perfect size for Boots to reach his food bowl.”

“I see. You inherited Boots with the house.”

Mia points out, “He’s called Boots because the fur on his legs looks like he’s wearing boots. Though he prefers to be called Mister Boots, apparently, he’s an old man and I have to be polite,” she grins at Rage.

“Aww, isn’t that the cutest thing ever,” I say as I sit across from Mia.

“No,” Rage comments pointing a spatula at me. “I’m the cutest thing ever and don’t you girls forget it.”

I smile behind my coffee cup, but Mia shakes her head at Rage. “You’re not cute. You’re a big scary biker with tattoos.

Rage puffs out his chest proudly and responds, “Damn straight I am, kid.”

She frowns at him. “You said that word.”

He grumbles, “We’re gonna need to start a swear jar or something, I’ve been cursing my whole damn life. It’s a da- hecking hard habit to break.”

While I’m thinking about starting a swear jar for Rage, he wanders over with a huge platter of bacon, eggs, and huge round biscuits.

I look up at him with new eyes. “You make homemade biscuits?”

By this time he’s stepped across to pull out some plates and flatware. He comes back grinning from ear to ear. “It was old man Gerald. He said cathead biscuit making was a dying art and insisted I learn. He didn’t have to push too hard because I fell in love with catheads.”

Mia stops drawing and asks, “Why are they called cathead biscuits. They don’t have little pointy cat ears sticking up.”

Rage sits down and hands us each a plate. “That’s a good observation. I asked Gerald that very same question, he said it’s because they’re the size of a cat’s head.” He reaches over and holds a biscuit beside Mister Boots’ head. It’s about the same size.

About that time, his cat got mean. He swipes one paw with his claws out and grabs at

the biscuit. Rage grumbles, “I was gonna give you one, no need to claw and grab, you cranky old man.”

Instead of eating it, his cat bats it down into the chair and curls up around it. I guess using it for a heating pad.

Rage begins putting food on our plates, “Ignore Boots. He’s got cat dementia.”

I pick up a piece of bacon and took a bite off the end. There was something about this scene that seems so right. Me and Mia sitting at the table with Rage laughing and joking like a real family. My mind went back to what Meli had said yesterday. Looking between Rage and my daughter both giggling and joking about something, they seemed like twins.

But it couldn’t be.

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Rage

Three Weeks Later

Waking up at the crack of dawn with morning wood is no way to start the day. I roll out of bed and get into the shower because I have church in an hour. I've been so wrapped up in the situation with Priscilla and Mia that I haven't been hanging around the clubhouse as much as I normally do.

The thing is, I can't concentrate on work, club activities, or visiting friends, because all I think about is Priscilla and what it would be like to have her in my bed again. Having her this close is torture. My hand slides down to grasp my cock as I remember how much she enjoyed sucking my it. I would hold her hair back out of her face. She looked like she was lost in her own little world and God knows no one had ever been that generous with me before. Being with her was everything I always dreamed that love could be.

I fell hard and fast for her, which was why getting that Dear John letter from her threw me a curveball. I try and shove that from my mind as my hand works faster, remembering how her lips felt as they wrapped around my shaft. We were so good together, she loved riding my thick cock like nobody's business.

An image of her face, head thrown back in ecstasy as she rode me flashed through my mind. I groan as I shoot my load against the shower wall.

The moment I come I feel like an asshole. Stroking one off to my houseguest seems all kinds of wrong, especially after all she's been through. I wash myself off and hose

down the shower wall. I'm still breathing hard, and it feels like my brain went from zero to sixty in ten seconds flat. Luckily, Priscilla has gone to a medical appointment today, so I don't have to face her at the breakfast table. Right now I don't think I could look her square in the face without being eaten up by guilt.

I grab a cup of java when I fill up my motorcycle on the way to the clubhouse and drink it down in a couple of gulps before getting back on my bike.

I walk into church while everyone is still milling about. Ven rushes up to me. "Is everything okay? I haven't heard from you in a while."

"Yeah, I'm fine and dandy. The phone works both ways. You do know that, don't you?"

When he frowns, I decide to tease him a little. "I've seen your mom six times this month. She says to send you her regards, since she doesn't see much of you anymore."

"Damnit, Rage. You know Amy's pregnant, we have birthing classes twice a week," He spits out.

I slap his chest with the back of my hand. "I'm only jerking your chain, Meli knows why you've not been around much. You need to get a damn grip before you pick on the wrong dude, and they beat your freaking ass."

Suddenly, all his anger diminishes, replaced by amusement. "Did you just say freaking instead of fucking."

Fucking hell. "I sure did. I've got a kid living with me that mimics every damn thing I say."

“So,” he says in a knowing manner, “You’ve been trying to clean up your language. How interesting. And Priscilla and Mia are still living at your place. Best be careful, the last woman I let move into my place ended up becoming my wife.”

I drop down into the nearest seat. “I’m not getting married to her. It’s not like that.”

He smirks down at me before claiming the seat beside me. “Yeah, that’s the kind of stupid shit I told myself right before I fell hard and fast for Amy.”

“I’m not you. You’re a dumbass who fell for the first woman you saved. I’m a paramedic who saves women morning, noon, and night. I don’t need to wife one of them up to feel like a hero.”

“Do you actually believe the garbage coming out of your mouth because I sure as hell don’t,” my friend says with a shit-eating grin on his face.

My lips press into a firm line as I consider his words. I let out a sigh, “No, I don’t believe my own words right now.”

“What’s going on, brother. Talk to me?” Venom is my best friend. Talking to him about my problems should not be this hard. I finally force it out. “Priscilla is the one from my past that broke my heart.”

“Holy shit. Are you serious about her?”

Folding my arms over my chest, I answer, “No. Yes. Maybe. Hell, I don’t know. All I know is that I want to keep her at my house and make sure nothing bad happens to her.”

“What? I thought you originally said she was staying with you until she got on her feet.”

“That was the original plan. It’s coming up on six weeks since her injury. She’s at the doc’s this morning and she’s healing up fine. She was about to go to college back when I knew her. For some reason she dropped out, I told her that she should get back into that.”

“But that would mean that she would end up staying with you for what? Four years or more?”

I nod.

“You really like her, don’t you?”

Something about the solemn tone of his voice gets to me. “Yeah, I never stopped liking her. That’s always been the problem for me. Now that she has a kid, I’m more protective than ever.”

“What are you gonna do, brother?”

I shake my head, resenting the headache that’s building there. “I don’t know. She told me she’s only accepting my help for her daughter’s sake. She’s shown no interest in getting back with me.”

“Damn, Rage. Her husband’s been dead for less than two months. Cut the woman some slack.”

Shooting him an exasperated look, I tell it to him straight. “I’ve been stroking myself off like a demon, sometimes two or three times a night. I’m seriously fucked. I can’t let her go before she’s ready, but having her close and not being able to touch her is a living hell. I feel like the creepiest motherfucker going jerking off to thoughts of her when she’s in my house.”

“I feel you on that one, bro. You need to blow off some steam with one of the club girls before you fucking explode.”

I reply stubbornly, “These are the kinds of problems that club whores and booze can’t fix.”

“You’re letting this get to you, brother. That’s a bad move. She’s going to live rent free in your head forever now.”

Before I can answer that she’s already been doing that for the last eleven years, Siege drops the gavel and calls the meeting to order. Ever since we found Ven’s old lady and her mother, things have been pretty quiet for our club. In my opinion, that’s always the time to stay sharp, because things inevitably pop off.

We talked about old business, which was the huge amount of money we raised for the women’s shelter. And then new business. After busting the meth lab out at the Grayson farm, the Grave Diggers MC have started encroaching on our territory again. It almost feels like we ran off the bigger criminals and the smaller ones saw that as an opportunity of sorts. It seems as though we can’t win for losing, but I know all the way down to my bones that we’ll never stop fighting to protect our community.

Siege sets up brothers to monitor the roads in and out of town. Of course, he wants Ven’s drones in the air as well.

The last thing on our agenda is voting on patching one of our prospects into the club. The brother’s name is Wyatt, and he used to be a Texas Ranger. Wyatt is a hard-working and dedicated prospect. He’s older than our usual prospects, being in his late thirties, I guess that gives him a different outlook on life—dude knows what he wants and ain’t messing about. I’ve seen him around, worked with him and he’s extra cautious about protecting the old ladies when the brothers are on a mission. I’d trust him with my girls.

Fuck. My girls?

I do a double take, shocked that I so easily think of them as mine after a mere six weeks of them being in my life.

Wyatt gets up and talks about what the brotherhood means to him and why he wants to join the Savage Legion MC. I gotta admit that it sounds like he's got his head screwed on tight, so when it comes time to vote, I say yay, as do all the other brothers present, and Tex is patched in.

By the time Siege calls an end to the meeting, it's midmorning. I'm about to sit down and talk to Ven when my phone rings. It's Priscilla, so I quickly answer it. She doesn't usually call when I'm at work or at the clubhouse so I know it must be something important.

"What's up, Prissy. Is everything okay?"

There's a short silence, and she finally says weakly, "Can you come home. I'm not sure what to do about this."

I start walking towards the door with Ven on my heels. "Talk to me, Prissy. What happened?"

"I found a headless animal on your front porch welcome mat."

I stop walking. "Mister Boots likes to leave gifts. It's his way of saying he likes us and is a bit worried about our lack of hunting skills. He usually just brings birds. What did he kill this time?"

She stammers, "It's not Boots, It's a rabbit, two actually, a large one and a baby one. It's in a box wrapped in newspaper with no lid."

I curse long and hard under my breath before telling her, “Don’t fucking touch it. I’m on my way.”

When I end the call and take off running for my bike, Ven follows, yelling, “What the fuck happened?”

“Priscilla found a cardboard box with two headless rabbits, looks like a mommy and baby. Someone is fucking with her, or me. Either way, I’m gonna make them wish they were never born.”

Ven jumps on his bike and follows me.

It takes us about twenty minutes to get to my place at top speed on the backroads. I come to a skidding stop in front of my house and see the cardboard box still on my welcome mat and Priscilla sitting on my porch swing with Boots in her lap. He’s acting weirdly protective, glaring at the box. I don’t know what’s going through his cat head, but he’s clearly picking up on the tension.

Ven and I take the box to my shed and glove up before inspecting the gruesome contents. I lift out the smaller one. I’m no good at figuring out rabbit ages, but it’s clearly a baby. Ven takes out the larger rabbit and looks it over. “I’m guessing it’s the mother. She has teats. What about yours?”

I look more closely at mine. “Mine isn’t a newborn but she’s not fully grown either.”

“You sure it’s a female,” he asks in a serious tone.

“Of fucking course, I’m sure. It doesn’t have balls.”

“What do you think this means?”

I put the smaller one back down beside the box, thinking I need to get the box dusted for prints or something. Ven lays his down on the table beside mine. “I’m pissed. Mia could have been the one to find this instead of Priscilla.”

I begin pacing. “We need to get the club involved. Maybe Tex can dust it for prints, and we can get one of our contacts at the PD to run them? I’m gonna try my fucking best to get a security system installed as soon as humanly possible.”

“You alert Siege and start calling security firms. I’ll call Tex to get his ass out here,” Ven says.

We work on our individual tasks. I decide to walk outside and check on Priscilla. I’m still on the phone with Siege when I sit beside her on the porch swing.

Glancing at Priscilla, I ask, “How you holding up?”

“Was it what it looked like?”

I decide to tell her the truth, “Yeah. On my way home, I was thinking it was a toss-up as to who it was meant for, you or me. I think we can safely say it was meant for you, it was a mother rabbit and her baby.”

She begins to tear up. “Why would anyone send me something like that? I don’t understand.”

“It’s a message, or a threat. Since there wasn’t a note, we don’t know what they want. Do you have any ideas on who could have sent this?”

She shakes her head despondently. “No, my family moved to the East Coast several

years ago and I'm not in contact with them. My dad works for a construction company as a material handling specialist. I can imagine them being upset that their money stopped. But they wouldn't be mad at me because Conrad got himself killed."

"How about Conrad's family?" I ask her. My gut tells me they had something to do with it.

She pales, "His father never cared for me. Conrad wanted me and his parents made my parents a deal they couldn't refuse."

I sigh and ask the question I'd been hoping to avoid. "I got the letter you sent me, saying we weren't right for each other and that you wanted to finish your education and then marry someone who would give you kind of life your parents had. Did you really see no red flags with Conrad and his family?"

Her head snaps up, hard and fast. Suddenly, her eyes are laser focused on me. "I never sent you a letter and if I did it would have never said that kind of rubbish. I loved you with everything I had in me."

"Then why did you leave me and marry Conrad?" I ask bluntly.

She looks almost sick to her stomach as she explains, "My parents told me you were dead, that you died in a motorcycle accident."

"What?" I exclaim.

She bit her lip and looks at me, her eyes filled with tears, "They told me you were dead, and—"

"And you believed them without proof? That doesn't sound like the Prissy girl I knew."

“Of course I didn’t believe them! I threw a fit, called them liars and told them I was going to look for you. They told me that they could prove it. They took me to a cemetery and showed me your headstone. It had your name carved right on the front, along with all the information they normally put on headstones. I broke down, didn’t want to leave, they dragged me away and I just kind of emotionally shut down.”

She seems brokenhearted as she continues, “They kept pressuring me to let Conrad console me, but I didn’t want him not after—” she breaks off. “I wanted you, and knowing I’d never see you again tore me apart. I couldn’t stop crying, I wouldn’t eat, wouldn’t sleep. My parents told me that this wasn’t healthy and couldn’t continue and that I had to marry Conrad. I felt trapped and defeated, so I did what they said because it was the only way I could give myself and... it was the only way I could have a life. I didn’t know Conrad’s family was giving them a kickback for getting me to agree. I thought they loved me and wanted what was best for me. Except they were only looking out for themselves.”

I’m shaking my head in disbelief. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that. Your parents were pieces of shit but creative ones to come up with a solution like that. What cemetery was it? I want to see my fucking grave with my own eyes.”

“It was the one over on Strayer Avenue. I haven’t been back there since that last time, it was too heartbreaking. I don’t understand why they did that, how they could choose money before their own daughter? How could they let me believe you were dead?”

“Because they’re assholes. Why didn’t you tell me this?”

She’s shaking as she looks at the ground and then into my eyes, “I tried, after my accident I was still in shock. Then realizing you were still alive. I tried to talk about the past, but you said we didn’t need to go there. You must have hated me if you thought I sent that note.”

“I’ll not deny I was angry and bitter about it for a long time. I don’t know if I ever got over it, but when you came into my life again, I decided to let the past stay in the past.”

Her eyes are glistening with tears, “And you believed my note. You thought I’d do something as awful as that?”

“When you stopped answering my calls, I went to your house asking to talk to you. They said you didn’t want to see me, that you got into an Ivy League college. It made you realize that we were nothing alike and you needed a better life than what you’d have with trash like me.”

Her hand comes out rest on my chest. She’s tearing up and shaking her head, but I push the rest of the story out. “They said I wasn’t wealthy or educated and you deserved a man who could take good care of you. They made me doubt myself and that you could truly love someone like me.”

“I hate that they did that to you,” she says quietly.

“Deep down inside I was insecure and knew what they were saying was probably right, but I still wanted to hear it from you. So I went back a few days later, demanding to speak to you. Your parents said you’d already gone but had left a letter for me. I can still remember how my hand shook when I reached out to take that letter from your dad. I rode off to a spot down by the lake to read it in private. It said we weren’t right for each other and although I would always have a place in your heart, you needed to live the life you were meant to live.”

She immediately speaks up, “The life I was meant to live was with you, Rage. Until...” her words trail off.

“It’s too bad that ship sailed long ago, Prissy girl,” I respond sadly.

“I’m sorry, Rage, sorry for it all.”

I glance away, crushed by the weight of this new information we’re sharing back and forth. Getting a hold of myself, I suggest, “Let’s go look for my grave. I want to see the lengths your greedy parents went through to separate us. We’ll take my truck.”

“Okay,” she says. Her voice is small, and it looks like she’s deep in thought.

Ven walks up. “Tex is on his way.”

“So is Siege and the other club officers. I have something important to do. Can you wait for them and let them in the shed?”

“Of course. You going to look at security systems?”

“No, believe it or not, I’m going to visit my own fucking grave and look at my headstone.”

Shock registers on his face. “What the everloving fuck?”

“I’ll tell you all about it when we get back,” I assure him.

Priscilla was healed enough to climb in and out of my truck now, so we both hopped in, and I headed for the cemetery she told me about. Although, I had long been looking forward to her being able to ride on the back of my bike, right now that was the furthest thing from my mind.

Our conversation put me right back there eleven years ago as her parents berated me and told me I was nothing, obviously clearly not good enough for their only daughter. The old feelings of helpless rage and humiliation rise in my mind,

On the way we talk about what poor soul was buried in that space and what they'd done with his headstone. Once we pull into the cemetery, Priscilla leads me straight to the grave.

I look around and realize that my grave is by far the nicest one in the general vicinity. Priscilla immediately drops to her knees and meticulously begins picking leaves off the slab. I reach out and grab her hand. "It's not me, Prissy. I'm right here."

She throws her arms around my neck and sobs. I gaze over her shoulder at the headstone. It was my correct name, date of birth, and the date of death was when she disappeared from my life. After getting the fabricated note, I joined the military and left this small, sleepy town behind. When I came back, I avoided every place we'd ever gone together and made a point of not checking up on her once I heard she'd moved on and married some rich bastard. I hadn't wanted to know his name or anything about him.

Everything about this situation is heartbreaking. Eventually, I see a caretaker in the distance. I ease Priscilla out of my arms and wave him over. I introduce myself to the old man and ask, "Can you tell me anything about his headstone?"

"I know about everyone buried her for the last fifty years. This was strange request. The gentleman was cremated, and his urn is buried here. It's called an internment of ashes."

"No, he's not. I'm Raymond Anderson." Pulling out my wallet, I show him my driver's license.

"Maybe this man was simply someone with the same name."

"It's not, though. Can you verify that an urn is buried here?"

He removes a small handheld device from his belt. “This is a ground penetrating scanning device. We use them to make sure caskets and urns don’t shift following flooding. Sometimes the water table rises and will move them slightly.”

We watch as he moves it slowly over the entire grave. Then we watch him do it again. “There doesn’t seem to be anything here.”

I just decide to lie to him. “I was in a motorcycle accident at this time and was in a coma for weeks. I think my parents were preparing for my last resting place. Fortunately, I woke up and didn’t need it.”

The older man asks suspiciously, “Why does it have a date of death carved into the stone.”

“Look, I don’t know but this is my headstone, and I don’t want it out in the open confusing people.”

“I can’t let you just take it,” he insists stubbornly.

“My parents passed, so technically it belongs to me,” I lie some more. When he doesn’t immediately agree, I suggest, “How about if I pay you for it and give you my contact information in case anyone complains?”

I quickly open my wallet and count out five hundred-dollar bills and hand them to him. Without giving him time to object, I give the headstone several hard jerks to dislodge it. It takes all my strength to drag it over to my truck and wrestle it into the back of my truck bed. This one is relatively thin I realize, like they cheap-skated out on it because it was just a prop.

We immediately get into the truck and leave. We’re both a little shell-shocked as we drive home. I roll the information Priscilla gave me around in my head. The woman I

loved, literally thought I was dead. She grieved for me and never forgot me. I clearly meant as much to her as she meant to me. It was this warped situation her parents created that separated us. All it took for me was a fake letter. For my Priscilla it took death. I let that sink in for a minute. That meant that regardless of her parents pressuring her into marry another man, some small part of her heart stayed loyal to me.

Glancing over at her, I see tears streaming down her face. I want her. She deserves another chance. I deserve one too. If can get her to want me back, I won't let anything in this world separate us again. I'll even take her daughter to raise. I actually like Mia. Maybe I'm not father material but I'm willing to step up my game and learn.

When we get to my house, the place is crawling with club brothers. I turn to Priscilla. "Do you mind if Meli picks Mia up from school and keeps her for a bit this evening. I don't think she should be around this whole mess. Not until we have a better idea what it's all about."

"I agree," she replies. "Do you think we're putting too much on Meli though?"

I shake my head, "Meli loves Mia, I sometimes think she gets a bit lonely living out there behind the restaurant. Once Ven and Amy's new home is ready and they move in, it won't be so bad, but in the meantime, she likes the company."

We get out and I walk Priscilla up to her room to rest. Once she's comfortable, I quietly shut her door on my way out and call Meli. After explaining what went on here today, she agrees to pick Mia up from school and keep her for however long we need. I ask that she hangs onto her overnight because I want a security system put in before she comes back to my house to stay.

With that taken care of I head outside to talk to Siege. Tex and Rigs are there, looking grim as well. They have their contact from the Las Salinas PD bagging up the entire box with both carcasses for their crime lab to work on. He takes my statement and heads out. I regret not having security cameras set up, but when I inherited this place from Gerald it was the last thing on my mind.

Siege, Rigs, Rider, Tex, and Ven approach me. Siege says, “Tell us everything you know. We need all the details if we’re going to piece together what happened here and why.”

I motion them over to my truck to see the thing that caused Priscilla to abandon all hope of being with me. All my club brothers crowd around as I start at the beginning and tell them everything I know. At the end of my long, convoluted story, they’re all about as shocked and dumbfounded as I am.

“Damn,” Ven says. “That was cold-hearted, vicious shit her parents pulled. I can’t believe they’d do something like that to their own daughter. And she raised a kid with that man. It’s a damn tragic story if you ask me.”

“I second that statement,” Rigs chimes in.

Others murmur their agreement as they gaze down at my creepy new trophy.

Siege speaks up. “We need to station brothers here until Rage can get a security system installed.”

Tex adds, “I can get a couple of prospects and cover tonight.”

“Thanks, Tex. I should be able to get the security system installed tomorrow even if I have to do it myself.”

Turing to Siege I say, “Mia is staying with Ven’s mom. I don’t know how comfortable I feel with them not having someone there overnight.”

Ven jumps in, “I’ll take a couple of brothers and cover her house. My mom can handle herself, but better to be safe than sorry.”

Rigs adds, “And I’ll hook up with our police contact over the next few days and alert everyone when we get feedback from the crime lab. Headless rabbits are a seriously fucked up message to send.”

Zen offers, “I’ll keep looking into both families. See if she has any friends, enemies, or people that she’s had a throw down with before and I’ll check on them as well.”

Siege wraps things up, “As always, we just keep looking for clues until it leads us to the person doing this. This is some seriously sick shit that we can’t look the other way on.”

I speak up, “My gut tells me it’s her dead husband’s father. He’s been a serious asshole to her over the years. And Priscilla mentioned that Conrad had an older brother. Maybe he’s pissed about his brother’s death and is looking for someone to blame?”

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Priscilla

Lying in bed, I'm truly shaken, not just about the rabbits but about the headstone, Conrad shooting me and getting killed by the SWAT team... just everything. It all feels surreal, like I'm a stranger standing outside my life watching one depraved thing after another take place. It's too much and I'm glad Mia isn't here to see this latest round of what the fuck.

I pull the blankets over my head and just let it all out. I cry so hard I give myself hiccups.

Eventually, after I'm all cried out and sobbing, the hiccups slowly diminish and go away completely. I hate that I lost control of my emotions but at least no one saw me breaking down. Deep down inside, I know I needed a good cry to purge all those negative feelings before Mia comes back, I need to be strong for her.

I lift up the blanket, making an opening between my face and the room because if I don't get some fresh air, I'm going to pass out. I close my eyes and try and think positive thoughts. Mia's smiling face floats to the forefront of my mind. That little girl is so resilient, the way she's coped with everything that's happened over the last few weeks is nothing short of amazing. Though I know I have Rage to thank for that too, the way he stepped up to take care of her when I couldn't.

Seeing them together is startling, the similarity between them is unmistakable and my mind goes back to what Meli said to me at the restaurant—and once more I wonder if it could be true? It's something I wished for, for so many years, but I always told myself that it couldn't be.

I tried to blank out that awful night when Mia was conceived, but I'm living with the consequences. Don't get me wrong, I love my daughter with all my heart but only I know the truth, her father is a monster. Rage and I were in love, we might have been childhood sweethearts, but it was real. I had been secretly hoping that he was going to ask me to marry him, I was heading to college in the fall, but I knew our love would survive the distance. Then my world was consumed by evil. I had vaguely known Conrad, we attended the same high school though we moved in different circles and took different classes, however his older brother Ashton was a creep. I'd mistakenly thought him harmless until one night when I was on my way home from a friend's house and he attacked me. I tried to fight him off, but I was powerless. I'd told my parents, but they said because the Whitmores were so wealthy I couldn't go to the police. They told me I had to put the whole incident out of my head, but how could I? I was a wreck.

I couldn't face Ray, I couldn't bear to see the look on his face, so like a coward I ran off to college. It was when I started vomiting six weeks later that I realized the truth. I was pregnant and it was Ashton's baby. It had to be, because Ray and I had always used condoms. I returned home on winter break not knowing what to do. I needed to speak to Ray and tell him what happened and see if he would take me back, that's when my parents told me he'd died. I'd refused to believe it until they showed me his grave.

No matter how my daughter came into being, I loved her with all my heart even before she was born. It wasn't her fault that her father was a psychopathic rapist. I told my parents I was pregnant, insisting it was Ashton's baby. But they said I was wrong, that it was Ray's, but they had a solution. I was to marry Conrad. If I agreed, then he would look after my daughter as if she were his own. His family was rich, and we'd be taken care of, my parents said I had no choice and I had to do as they said. In my messed-up state of mind I found myself agreeing and so I left college and returned to Las Salinas and became Mrs. Whitmore.

It's only in hindsight I realized what must have actually happened, my parents had gone to Malcolm Whitmore and told him that his son raped me. The monthly stipend they received was hush money, and the arranged marriage with Conrad was to keep the evidence of that rape close. However, they couldn't acknowledge that Mia was their granddaughter, so they kept up the pretense that she was Ray's. It was around the time of my marriage to Conrad that his brother went into a long-term psychiatric care unit, I suppose that was my father-in-law's concession to admitting his son was disturbed and a rapist and to ensure he received the treatment he needed. Things hadn't been bad with Conrad, there was no emotion in our marriage, but he never hurt me, it was only in the past year leading up to the night he shot me when his behavior changed. A change that coincided with his brother being released.

As soon as my mind goes back to that night my breathing quickens and I realize I'm hyperventilating. I try and take a deep breath, but then suddenly I catch the rancid stench of those dead rabbits mixed with the scent of moist earth from the cemetery and Rage's grave. I'm shaking and crying as I pull off my clothes as if they are contaminated. Flipping the shower on hot, I can barely force myself to stand there adjusting the temperature. When it's as hot as I can stand it, I step into the water and close the door. I scrub myself so hard because I've got to get this smell off me. I feel disgusting, I am disgusting. What the hell is happening to me? I don't know why I'm doing this, and I can't seem to stop. Dark thought crawls forth from the back of my mind that if I scrub hard enough, I can wash away all the heartache and bad decisions I've made over the years. I can wash away the memory of that night. Wash it away and replace it with something new.

Mumbling under my breath and scalding myself is how Rage finds me. I didn't even hear him come into the bathroom, must less come into the shower with me. I only realize he's there when his arms come up behind me and gently lift me out from under the too hot stream of water cascading down from the showerhead and he wraps me in a huge white towel.

I freeze in place, humiliated that he found me falling apart. I have to face the fact that I'm in no way good enough for this man even if deep inside I wondered if we had a chance. He's strong, smart, compassionate, and so attractive that women literally swoon over him. I'm now just another struggling single parent, mercifully freshly out of a messed-up relationship. The only thing we have in common is a history of heartache.

He turns off the shower, opens the door and helps me out.

"Sit there for a moment, darlin'," he says as he directs me to the chair. When I'm seated, he strips the bed and makes quick work of changing the duvet cover.

"All good now," Rage says as he pats the bed.

I get up and climb into the bed, savoring the feel of the clean sheets. Rage then gets up and leaves the room and I wonder where he's gone.

I lay there for a few minutes in the darkened room, my panic gone and my mind calm. Still under the covers, I hear the bedroom door open and close. When a warm body slides onto the bed beside me on top of the duvet and pulls me into his arm, I know it's Rage. I can tell by his scent and the way he touches me. I turn over, bury my face in his chest and wrap my arms round him.

"You okay, sweetness?" he whispers into my hair.

"Sorry, you didn't need to see me like that," I mumble.

"It was the smell, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," I reply. That was part of it, that, and other things. At that moment I want to tell him about Mia, about how she was conceived. About the reason I ran away, but I

can't. I'm a coward.

"I noticed it too. Sometimes if I've had a hard day at work, or when things were... well, I was a battlefield medic, I don't need to tell you what I've seen. Anyway, I get it, I get the need to scrub that smell off, even if the smell is only in your head." He strokes my hair, and I lean into his touch.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to freak out," I say and lift my head up. I'm under the duvet and he's on top, he's taken off his jeans and shirt which got soaked when he ran into the shower and is naked save for a towel wrapped around his waist. Suddenly I'm not feeling fear or guilt or anything negative. There's a warmth rushing through my body that I haven't felt in years.

"From now on if you start to panic, you call me, scream my name and I'll come running. I don't ever want you being alone when you're like that. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Prissy?"

I nod. "It's just embarrassing. I don't like people to see me like that."

"I'm not just anybody. I'm your best friend, your first love, and the man who will always be there for you when others let you down," His finger trails down my cheek, before he checks himself and pulls his hand back.

"That felt nice," I say cautiously.

"I missed you Priscilla, I missed the feel of your skin, your laugh. Everything. When you left it felt like part of me left too."

"I'm sorry," my voice is quiet.

"Don't be, you told me what happened. I know my Prissy didn't run out on me. I

can't imagine what it was like for you," he shifts so he's on his side looking at me. My eyes eat up his body in the soft light, the tattoos covering his chest, shoulders, and arms. The smattering of hair. His long hair curling at his shoulders, it's drying in ringlets and for a moment my mind springs to Mia. My daughter's hair does that too.

"I don't think I ever stopped grieving for you," I say as I lift my hand up and cup his cheek. His goatee is neatly trimmed, but I can feel the five o' clock shadow on his cheeks where his beard is growing in. An image of kissing him flashes through my mind. I remember how soft his lips were.

His green eyes gaze into mine, and before I know what's happening I find myself leaning up, searching for his lips. His lips are somehow soft and demanding at the same time. He slides one hand through my hair and gently tugs my head back as his tongue plunders my mouth. When I give in to his kisses, his hands drop down to explore my body. His touch is familiar and spikes my arousal something fierce.

I slide my hands through his shoulder-length hair just to feel the texture. It seems coarser and more masculine than it did when we were teens.

Suddenly he pulls back.

I'm dazed with lust and glance up to see he's wearing a similar expression.

"God Priscilla, I've missed you so much," his voice is hoarse and when I look down, I can see his erection punching the front of the towel. "You've had a frightening day, when something like that happens it's easy to misread emotions. I don't want you doing something you'll regret."

I gaze up at him, my heart pounding. "I've missed you too, Ray. Yes, today was awful, it was terrifying. But I'm not scared now. With you I feel the safest I've ever been, it's like coming home." I realize that I've been on an emotional rollercoaster

lately but here with Rage I know with absolute certainty what I want. I slowly push away the blanket, exposing my breasts, “I want this, I want you, Ray. It’s not adrenaline or fear or whatever talking. It’s me.”

His eyes widen as he takes in my body. I’m not sure what he’s seeing, I’ve put on weight since I was a teenager and there’s no missing the healing bullet wound on my chest. But the expression on his face tells me everything I need to know. He clearly likes what he sees. “You sure about this?”

I move closer and rub his naked chest with my hands. “I’m surer than I’ve ever been sure about anything.”

“What about Conrad? If you need more time. I can wait until you’re ready.”

“I don’t want to talk about Conrad right now, but you need to know, we didn’t have a conventional marriage. I only slept with him a handful of times and not in the last few years.” Now wasn’t the time to tell him how Conrad barely showed me any interest, he had affairs, and he was discreet about them, but it was obvious to me that he didn’t find me attractive. Which had made me wonder why he’d married me —though knowing what I do now, he was obviously pressurized into marrying me to cover up his brother’s crime. That one night ended up ruining three lives, mine, Rage’s, and Conrad’s.

Rage’s mouth falls open, but he recovers quickly. “I’m glad you didn’t have to be intimate with someone you didn’t like. You deserve so much better than that.”

“For the first time in my life, I’m starting to think you’re right. I do deserve better than the hand I was dealt in life.”

He tugs me closer and murmurs, “You sure as fuck do. Conrad was a fool for not seeing how special you are. I’m not about to make the same mistake.”

Before I can respond, he maneuvers me down onto the bed and comes down beside me. I realize he's intent on keeping his weight off my still sore body. Everything about this man is good.

His lips meet mine again and I get lost in the kiss, forgetting everything that's happened and only concentrating on the moment. He kisses his way down my body, carefully edging around the bullet wound. It's still a fierce angry red but the hole has healed over. It's more unsightly than painful.

By the time his head is between my legs, I remember the reason sex with Rage was always mind blowing, he excels at foreplay and relishes in exploring my body.

Tonight is no different. He tries the things I like from when we were teens and a few techniques that are new. I like it all, so very much. It's like my body is starved for the exact kind of pleasure he deals.

When he begins to lick my slit, I spread my legs wider, wanting to encourage him as much as possible. He gladly takes the space I open up for him, wedging his big shoulders between my legs as he fucks me with his tongue. When Rage concentrates all his efforts on my clit, I zone out, aware of nothing more than the man who's giving all the pleasure a woman could ever ask for.

He traces around my clit in tight firm circles, and it drives me mad with need. Then his tongue dips down to thrust inside me. It feels like a sacred promise of what's to come when he uses his cock. He's making my pussy flood with honey just for him. I run my hands through his hair as he tongue-fucks me. "So, good," I whisper.

I come around his tongue with his thumb on my clit once and again with mouth on my clit and his fingers deep inside me.

He moves up over me but doesn't come down on top of me. Instead, he rolls us

gently, pulling me on top. I've got one leg on either side of his hips, and riding his cock to oblivion is all I can think of in this moment.

He helps me lift myself up and onto his thick cock. He's spent a lot of time stretching me out but taking him is still a challenge. I ease my way down, feeling the burn as he breaches the walls that haven't seen any action for years.

"You feel virgin tight," He whispers as if awestruck.

I know that if we continue fooling around, my body will retain a Rage-sized space in my core, but I'm willing to chance it for one more night with him where I can forget all my troubles.

As he bottoms out in my body. I feel so full and almost don't want to move. I take a few minutes and then I snatch all my courage up and lift off him. Feeling his cock dragging through every square inch of my pussy is like no pleasure I've ever known.

He's just as excited as I am because he helps me lift myself and then eases me back down slowly. We slowly increase our pace. When I want to go hard, he sets a gentler pace, not going as deep or hard as I want. It's frustrating as hell but I know he's trying to go easy on me, so I decide to play nice.

The result is pure magic. Intense pleasure flows back and forth between us as he tells me how beautiful I am to him, how good my pussy feels wrapped around his cock. He's graphic and brutally honest. In this moment, I don't doubt him at all. Finally I lean forward and take a little more control. We go at my pace, experimenting with long slow strokes and short slow strokes, I love it all and can't wait to feel him come inside me.

We make love for what seems like hours and fall into each other's arms, sweaty and spent. We used to wake up in the night and go another round or two, but I know Rage

won't allow that until I'm released from my doctor's care.

When I see the pure unbridled happiness on his face, I know deep down in my soul that we were meant to be. Unfortunately, other people with bad intentions got in our way. I vow to fight the world to keep him this time.

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Rage

I wake up wrapped around the only woman I've ever truly loved. She's just as soft, beautiful, and sweet as she was all those years ago. Maybe more so now that she was older and had given birth. Her shape was more womanly, her hips more rounded and her breasts were now heavy in my hands. She was no longer a fragile little wisp of a girl I had to worry about hurting when we had sex. This woman was made for a man like me and I was loath to let her slip away, especially after last night.

I was gentle with her because she was still healing. Something about having to hold back and restrain myself made the climax all the more enjoyable. Before I'd thought nothing in the world was more satisfying than a good hard fuck with an enthusiastic partner. Now, I realize my tastes have become more refined. I only want to have sex with one woman and being tender and gentle can be even more arousing if done right.

I hear my phone vibrating somewhere and slide out of bed to look for it. Of course it's still in my room. I was in a rush to get to Priscilla last night when I realized she was upset in the shower. Thank God I rushed in when I did. I don't know how much more she could have stood the hot water on her fragile skin.

I rush out and answer it before it wakes up Priscilla, who's still sleeping soundly. After the scares of yesterday she needs all the rest she can get.

Siege answers when I say hello, "Zen dug up some information on your woman. You might want to come to the clubhouse. We're meeting to parse through the data. That's IT speak for trying to make sense of all the fragmented information he's dug up from state and county sources."

I can tell by the tone of his voice, he's trying to be funny, probably to lighten the dark mood that hung over our last meet up.

"I'm leaving now. Don't start without me."

I pull on a t-shirt and a clean pair of jeans and grab my cut. Siege sounds frazzled so I don't wanna keep him waiting, I really need a coffee but that will have to wait. I put on my boots at the door and slide my cut on once I'm on the porch. I see Tracker standing like a sentinel, scanning the area with a pair of binoculars. I jog out to meet him.

"Thanks for being on the lookout last night. I slept better knowing you were on the job."

He gives me a twitch of a grin. "It wasn't just me. Evan, Ralph, and Larry are here as well."

"I'd like to think four men watching my house all night is a bit of an overkill but to be honest, unless I know who the enemy is, I can't be sure it's not necessary."

"Agreed. Don't worry, we won't leave until you get back or Siege sends replacements. If any fucker tries to sneak up on your place, he's gonna get hogtied and escorted the clubhouse for interrogation."

I slap him on the back and tell him, "Let's hope and pray the dirty bastards turn out to be stupid enough to show up here twice in as many days."

He laughs, "That would make our job considerably easier."

"It would, but I've gotta go. Siege said Zen dug up information that might help us figure out what the fuck is going on here."

“Better run, brother. You know how impatient Siege is to get things done.”

“Oh, I’m all too familiar with how hard-driven he can be.”

When I walk out to get on my bike, I catch sight of Evan with Mister Boots in his arms. It’s a strange sight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in anyone’s arms except Gerald’s. Boots doesn’t normally allow that, that cantankerous feline seems to be softening in his old age.

I rush to the clubhouse in time to see Venom scoot into the meeting room. I pick up speed to catch up with him. “How’s Mia and my mom?”

He gives me a disgruntled look. “She’s our mom. I agreed to share her with you, not give her over to you.”

I decide to wind him up a bit. “She called me son yesterday. I think she really likes me.”

“Oh really? I know that’s a damn lie because she doesn’t even call me son and I’m her fucking actual real-life son.”

“I don’t know, man. I think you’re falling out of favor with her. She didn’t even send you croissants.”

“You got croissants and didn’t save me one?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer before adding, “You’re just bullshitting me like you always do. Want to know how I know?”

I just shrug.

“What word did she use for son?”

I try not to laugh because he’s right. Meli would use the French word for son, and I haven’t a fucking clue what it is.

When I don’t immediately answer, he swears under his breath, “I fucking knew it. I swear to God, if you keep winding me up about shit like this, I am going to beat your ass.”

“Calm the fuck down, Ven. If you weren’t so easy to mess with, people like me wouldn’t get such a fucking kick out messing with you.”

He points at me, making little punches with his finger against my chest to accentuate his point. “I am tired of your shenanigans. You have a shitty sense of humor. You really need to work on that before Mia begins shit talking people. She could get in real trouble for that at school you know.”

His words feel like a gut punch. Suddenly, I’m feeling all kinds of conflicted. Mia looks up to me. She probably would try to joke around like this if she saw me do it. Maybe I need to do better if I’m gonna be in her life. I frown at him but by that time, everyone is settling down around the conference table, so we follow suit.

Siege starts out the conversation by saying, “Zen, Rigs, and our contact at the Las Salinas PD have all been digging for intel and coming up with conflicting information. So, let’s get right down to it. Rigs, why don’t we start with the information from our police contact?”

Rig shuffles around some papers in front of him before speaking. “There were fingerprints all over the bunny box. They also found some trace DNA.”

Ven asks incredulously, “Is that what we’re calling it?”

Rigs shoots him an annoyed look. “Does it matter? You knew what I was talking about, right?”

“Yeah, I get your point. Did he find out who the prints belonged to?”

“Not as of yet. They’re working on scraping together enough evidence to haul Priscilla’s father-in-law in for questioning. If that happens, they’ll take his fingerprints and swab him for DNA. I’m told the fingerprint match will happen relatively quickly, but the DNA will take a week or two at best.”

Siege asks, “Anything else?”

“Nope, our contact is dedicating all his time to the bunny box.”

Zen speaks up, “I found something interesting. Priscilla’s parents went missing seven years ago off the coast of Wilmington, North Carolina. I found out about that because Conrad’s old man filed a missing person’s report. He mentioned a boating incident. Their boat was found on the drift, there was blood, but their bodies were never recovered. From what I could tell, the local police department ruled both as accidental deaths. Said they got caught in a storm surge that likely pulled them overboard.”

Shock roils through my gut. “What? I’m not sure Priscilla is aware that they’ve been declared dead. She told me they live on the East Coast.”

“That’s not all,” Zen says. “There was a hefty insurance policy of 4.3 million dollars that was paid out to guess who?”

Siege growls, “Out with it. This isn’t a fucking game show.”

“One Malcolm Whitmore, Priscilla’s father-in-law.”

“The fuck?” I say looking from one club brother to another. “Why would the beneficiary be the old man rather than Priscilla?”

Zen leans forward and grins. “Because the old man is the one who took out the policy with the approval of the parents. He was listed as the next of kin and the beneficiary, so that means the police and the insurance company would have no need to go digging up additional family members to notify. They created a neat little feedback loop to keep it all between themselves.”

Rigs slaps his hand down on the table. “Maybe Priscilla thinks they’re still alive because they are.” Looking at me, he says, “You told us that Priscilla’s family manipulated her into marrying Conrad in exchange for a stipend. Maybe it wasn’t a stipend, so much as an insurance policy. If they staged their deaths and split the payout, there are a lot of places in the world where a couple could live a nice long time off a few million dollars.”

Relieved that her parents likely weren’t dead, I relax back into my seat. “Priscilla isn’t doing so well right now. I hope and pray her shitty parents are running some kind of insurance scam because I don’t want to see her messed up all over again about them turning up dead.”

Siege speaks up. “Do we actually have any intel on the old man? Malcolm Whitmore has lived his whole life in this town. Someone has to know something about him.”

Zen answers, giving more information than any of us anticipated. “Malcolm Whitmore is seventy-three years old. It took me forever to figure out what he did for a living because all his holdings are run through shell companies. It’s like Russian nesting dolls but eventually I drilled down on how he makes his money.”

“Well, don’t leave us in the dark, brother.”

I glance at Rigs who seems excited to unravel some more of this mystery.

Zen keeps talking. “He’s a hard money lender. Most of his money is in offshore accounts. I’m still tracking down all the businesses he’s lending money to, but one drew my immediate attention. It’s called High Seas Boat Rentals, the very same company that rented Priscilla’s parents the boat that ended up on the drift.”

Words pop out of my mouth before I can stop them. “This whole situation with her parents is shady as fuck. I’ll bet my bottom dollar they’re still alive and living the good life in Mexico or some such shit.”

“I agree,” Siege says. “Unfortunately, they’re not our problem right now. We need to find out who’s delivering dead shit to your house.”

Zen continues talking. “I wonder if there might be an insurance policy on Conrad. I’ve been searching for that, I’ll let you know what I find.”

I turn to Siege. “I’m thinking about having a little sit down with Malcolm Whitmore. Maybe with proper persuasion he’ll tell us what the fuck is going on.”

Rigs advises, “We should wait and let the police have a crack at him first.”

I ask, “Why? They’re fucking useless. We can squeeze information out of him.”

“We need our contact because he has access to a crime lab, so let’s not alienate him just because we’re anxious.”

I hate to admit it, but Rigs is right once again. “Fine, I’ll hold off for now.”

“To be honest, I don’t think we’re gonna find an old man’s fingerprints on the bunny box,” Rigs explains, “Men like him have people for that kind of shit.”

“That’s fine,” Siege interjects. “We’ll track down the fucker that did this and wring information out of him about who’s pulling his strings. I want the person in charge, not their stupid lackey.”

I ask Zen, “Did you run across any information on Conrad’s brother, Ashton? Priscilla said he’s kind of weird.”

Siege snorts a laugh. “Of course he is. Look what kind of family he was raised in.”

Zen shakes his head, “No, I didn’t find much. It’s like he disappeared off the map for almost ten years. But last year he cropped up again, living with Daddy.”

Rigs asks, “So, what the plan?”

Without missing a beat, Siege answers, “I think it’s time for us to be eyes on with these bastards. Dutch, I want you and Tank to go out to North Carolina and talk to the officers about what happened to Priscilla’s parents, maybe snoop around that boat rental company. You’re smart men with experience getting to the truth. It might pay off for us in this situation.”

Tank responds, “We’ll leave right away and keep digging until I find something.”

Siege looks around the table at the rest of us before explaining, “I say we need to be eyes on with old man Whitmore and Ashton. Don’t approach them, just monitor them from a distance. It could be that if we look close enough, the fuckers might end up tipping their hand.”

“I want to be eyes on with the old man,” I tell them.

Siege nods, “Take Ven with you. I’ll send you out some relief this evening.”

Rider chimes in, “I can try to locate and sit on the brother.”

Siege reminds his best friend, “Make sure he doesn’t see you.”

Rider quips, “This is not my first stake out, boss.”

Siege flashes him a quick grin. “I know. A reminder never hurts, especially with you because you’re like bull in a china shop sometimes.”

We all break apart and go our separate ways. I call Priscilla on my way out the door.

When she answers, I ask, “Are you awake, sleepyhead?”

“What in the world did you do to me last night? I feel like I ran a marathon.”

“I’ll let you ride my cock anytime you want. There’s no need to flatter me, Prissy girl.”

She chokes out a laugh, “Maybe I’ll have to take you on another ride if the offer is still open.”

I chuckle, delighted that she’s so receptive to becoming my woman.

I take a deep breath before I tell her the rest, “I have some bad news for you this morning.”

“Is everything okay? You didn’t get hurt, did you?” Her voice is worried.

My heart squeezes that she’s concerned about my safety. I quickly reassure her, “No, it’s nothing like that. My club needs me to help them with something and it might take all day.”

“Oh, that’s fine. You love doing things with your club, right?”

She doesn’t need to know that this project involves researching her father-in-law and brother-in-law, so I give her a cryptic response, “I do, and today’s project is something near and dear to my heart.” Reaching my bike, I tell her, “Sorry, I have to run before I get left behind. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.”

“Alright, be careful out there.”

“I can take care of myself, sweetness. Don’t worry about me.”

She sighs, “I trust you, it’s the other idiots of the world that I worry about.”

My heart warms that she’s protective over me. I reassure her one more time before getting off the phone. Ven is parked beside me. He’s been sitting on his bike with both hands crossed over his helmet, listening to my conversation. “You have fallen from the bachelor ranks, my friend. It’s written all over your face when you talk to her.”

“You sure you’re up to another stakeout after being at your mom’s place all night?” I ask, swiftly changing the topic, because I really don’t want to be having this conversation right now.

He thumps his fist into his chest and smirks at me. “I’m the healthiest man in this club. Besides that, it was quiet, so I got a decent sleep—that’s when Barley quit his snoring.”

“Meli got you sleeping in the dog bed?” I joke.

Ven laughs, “You’re not wrong, I was on the sofa, which believe it or not is the dog’s bed, so we were fighting for it all night.”

“Knowing that beast I bet he won,” I laugh, trying to imagine Ven squeezing himself onto the sofa with a hundred-pound Briard.

Within seconds we get directions to old man Whitmore’s place and we’re off. As my tires eat up the highway, I turn the information I learned over in my mind. My club brothers seem to believe that Priscilla’s parents are alive and living the high life abroad.

The thing is, venture capitalists are notoriously reluctant to give money away. If he’s the kind of man to cut the heads off animals and deliver them as threats, I can see him keeping the money and arranging a real accident for her parents. I guess we won’t know until my club brothers get back from their cursory investigation in Wilmington. Seven years is also a long time for Priscilla to go without talking to her own parents, I wonder if they’ve really gone this long without speaking?

I know she was really angry with her parents because she bowed to their pressure and maybe went no contact with them for a while, but undoubtedly, she started talking to them again when she had Mia. The girl didn’t have much in the way of family, so throwing her grandparents away did not make sense. But how could she not know they were dead for seven years? Realizing she doesn’t know, makes me circle back around to believing they really are alive. I’m running in circles in my mind, and I need to ask her if she has heard from them recently.

Eventually, Venom and I find ourselves on a ridgeline overlooking a posh neighborhood. It’s not the one Conrad and Priscilla lived in, but it was worlds nicer than my little country house. I take my binoculars out of the storage compartment of my bike and Venom pulls out a small drone with a camera attached.

I’m glad Ven is my friend. He gives good advice when I’m trying to find my way through a complex problem and his drones always get the job done. We work well together even if we squabble at times. I guess that’s how brothers are though. We

settle down for a long day of surveillance.

Priscilla

After being woken up by Rage's call, I force myself to crawl out of bed and get into the shower. As the warm water cascades down onto my body, I think about last night. Rage has always been a badass, even when we were teens. He didn't take shit from anyone, unlike me who just had to suck it up and do as I was told. I envied his bravery, his willingness to step up and protect me, and how he just went straight for what he wanted in life.

Now that I've put a little distance between me and the events of yesterday, I can see that if I want to be with Rage—and he seems to be offering some kind of short-term interlude—I've got to pull my mess together and prove that I'm strong enough to be his counterweight in life. If I can prove myself, maybe he'll see me as worthy of a longer-term commitment. The more I think about my situation, the more convinced I am that proving I can hang in his world is the best course of action because it leads to the one thing I want in life, more time with Rage.

I get dressed in jeans, a warm sweater, and boots. After pulling back my hair into a tight twist at the nape of my neck, I feel like I'm ready for whatever the day decides to hit me with. The first order of business this fine Saturday morning is to pick up my daughter from Meli's place. I get Rage's truck keys from the key rack and step out the back door.

The first thing I see is a young prospect playing with Boots. He's got the grumpy older cat cradled on his back in the crook of his arm and is using the other hand to rub his belly and tease him with the tips of his fingers.

I warn him as I walk past, “That’s a nice way to lose a finger, prospect.”

He jumps to attention when he hears my voice. If this is one of the men meant to guard our home, God help us. This kid looks like he might not even be of age and he’s obviously highly distractible.

“Wait up, Miss Priscilla. Where are you going?”

“Out,” I say curtly.

“You can’t go out on your own. It’s not safe.”

“Well, I’ve got to pick my daughter up so, I guess I’ll just have to be really careful, okay?”

He drops Boots out of his arms, pulls his cellphone out and starts texting. “No can do, ma’am,” he says firmly. “If you go anywhere, we all have to go with you.”

I turn and stare at the young man. “You all. Exactly how many of you are there?”

“Four of us right now.” His phone beeps and he glances at the screen for a second and begins backing up. “Two of us will be in front of you and two behind. Remember, where you go, we go.”

This all sounds like a bit much to me but then again, I’m about to have my vulnerable daughter with me and some asshole had sent us headless animals yesterday. So, I turn around and get into Rage’s truck while the prospect runs for his motorcycle.

Within five minutes or so I’m driving down the interstate surrounded by members of the Savage Legion MC. Well, from what I can see, only one of them is an actual member. The other three are prospects which Rage explained are bikers in training. I

smile to myself. Maybe I'm not in a lot a danger and this is just busy work for the young men they're training. That actually sounds about right.

I hit the button on Rage's stereo system and listen to the country music he picked out for his vehicle. I truly feel like I'm living in a different world than when I was with Conrad. Rage is smoking hot, gives mind-blowing orgasms, and is nice as pie, totally the opposite of the rich boy my parents leveraged me into marrying. I'd give anything to have all those miserable years back so I could spend them with Rage. I wonder what would have happened if I'd not believed my parents when they'd shown me the gravestone. If I'd gone to Rage's foster home to ask them what happened to him. Maybe he would have understood that I didn't want to have sex with Ashton and maybe he would have been happy to raise another man's child. I sighed, the past was the past and all we had was the present and the future. I just wonder if my future could ever include Rage.

When I pull into Meli's restaurant, the place is rocking. There are several dozen cars out front and people coming and going. I don't see my daughter anywhere and that starts to worry me. I jump out of the truck, ignore my escort, and walk into the restaurant to look for Mia.

The lady who served us before, motions to the back with one hand. "They're in the kitchen." I can see that mostly people are clearing out, like they've just had a breakfast rush.

I don't ask if I'm allowed to go back there because this is the new and improved Priscilla. I boldly walk back and right through the saloon doors to find both Meli and Mia sitting at a table. They're rolling out cookie dough. Meli has the biggest glass of wine I've ever seen in one hand as she instructs my daughter in cutting out pretty shapes. She looks up at me when she senses movement and smiles as though she can't help herself. I'm relieved because I definitely wasn't her favorite person the last time I walked into her restaurant. I wonder if Rage has spoken to her about what

happened between us back then and told her that I didn't leave him willingly and I'd thought he was dead.

I smile and keep my voice light and pleasant. "Good morning, Meli. Thank you for allowing Mia to spend the night."

"It was my pleasure. Your daughter is delightful."

"She loves it here," I say.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" she asks, waving the bottle in the air.

"I'd love one, but as I'm driving I'd better have a coffee instead if you have a pot ready," I respond.

"Mais oui," Meli says as she slips out her chair and reaches for the French press.

I slide onto a stool beside my daughter as Meli pours me a cup of coffee that looks strong enough to get up and walk away and shoves a pretty platter of cheese and crackers over to me.

"I have to admit, the two of you look like you're having fun this morning."

Mia grins at me. "We always have fun. Last night we picked roses, chased lightning bugs, and roasted marshmallows in the fire pit. This morning Meli is going to teach me how to make strawberry conserve. That's like fancy French jelly."

"Sweetheart, I don't want you near the strawberries," I say.

"Oh do not worry," Meli puts her hand on the back of mine, "The pan will be hot so I will make sure she only watches. Though afterwards we can eat fresh croissants with

the conserve.”

“It’s not that,” I say. “She’s allergic. It’s not a deadly allergy, but if she eats them, she gets hives.”

Meli suddenly goes silent.

I look at her and she narrows her eyes, “This is very strange.”

“What is?” I ask.

“Rage, he too has an allergy.”

I’m silent for a moment, I know what she’s hinting at. I need to tell her about Ashton before she accuses me of lying to Rage again. I watch Mia who’s nibbling on cheese. “Mia, sweetheart, do you want to play on the porch with Barley while I speak to Meli for a moment? There are some nice men from Rage’s club there who can keep an eye on you.”

“Okay, Mommy,” she says and skips off happily.

Once we are alone, Meli fixes me with her clear gray eyes, “So you were lying to me?”

“I wasn’t,” I say, and suddenly the tears start to fall.

“Oh ma petite , please do not cry. Here, have wine and we shall talk,” she leans over and pours a generous serving into a wine glass and nudges it towards me.

I rub my eyes on my sleeve and take a sip, “I didn’t lie, Rage isn’t Mia’s father.”

“ Bof , this can’t be true. They are identical, why do you insist on denying it?” She takes a sip of her wine and pulls the bowl of strawberries towards her and picks up a paring knife.

“Because he isn’t, he can’t be, even if I wish so much that he was.”

“But you were his sweetheart, no?” she asks as she starts hulling the fruit.

“Yes, we dated throughout high school,” I say, my voice flat because I know I’m going to have to tell her about the worst time of my life.

“And you were intimate?” She stops cutting for a moment.

I nod.

Meli gives a Gallic shrug, “So, I do not see how you insist he isn’t the father.”

That’s all it takes for the tears to flow again.

“No, no, this will not do. No tears in my kitchen, tell me what happened. They say a problem shared is a problem halved,” Meli says as she hands me a piece of paper towel from the roll on the table.

“It’s more than a problem,” I say, my voice is shaky. Other than my parents who tried to cover everything up, I’ve never told a single person what happened to me that night. Looking back, maybe if I had told Conrad then we might have been closer, that’s if he knew what his brother did. Or maybe it was only his father who was in on it. Or maybe his father, like Conrad, thought Mia was Rage’s. “We were so in love, I was going to college in the fall and Ray was staying in Las Salinas, I truly believed we would be together forever and we’d survive being apart. A week before I was due to leave, I was heading home from a friend’s house when I was attacked,” I pause and

look at Meli.

“Attacked?” she starts to say, and then suddenly a look of understanding flashes over her face. “Oh my poor child, this man he- he—”

“Yes,” I say.

“And he was arrested?” Meli asks, she motions for me to take another sip of my wine, and it goes down smoothly.

I shake my head, “I told my parents, I knew him. He was my husband’s brother—the man who became my husband I should say, I didn’t really know Conrad well then. They came from a rich family and my parents told me that no one would believe me. I was so ashamed, I couldn’t face telling Ray what had happened. I was distraught, I felt dirty and I was scared he might think I asked for it—”

“Never!” Meli says emphatically, “Rage would never do such a thing.”

“At the time I didn’t know what to do, so I told my parents I didn’t want to see him, I blocked his number, and I left for college.”

“So you did leave him,” she says. Her voice isn’t accusatory this time and I can see the compassion in her eyes.

“Yes, and it’s something I regret bitterly. Especially now I know he didn’t die.”

“Die?” Meli asks, her eyes wide.

I take another mouthful of wine, and then another, and another. Meli tops up my glass and waits for me to continue. “I’d been in college for around six weeks when I started getting sick. At first, I thought I might have caught something, and then I realized I

was pregnant. Ray and I always used condoms, so I knew..." my words trail off.

Meli reaches out and places her hand on mine, "You poor, poor child."

"I didn't know what to do, but I had to tell my parents, a week before I came home for winter break, I phoned them and told them what had happened. They were horrified, but told me to tell no one, I told them that I wanted to speak to Ray, tell him what happened and that maybe he'd take me back and forgive me for running off without a word. My parents were angry and told me that I'd ruin my entire life if I married a man like that. But I was determined, I had to speak to him." I realize that the tears are running down my cheeks, speaking the words that had been choked up inside me for the last eleven years was cathartic, but also terrifying.

"Would he listen to you?" she asks.

I reach for the wine glass and upend it, "He was dead. That's what my parents told me, that he'd died in an accident five days before. I refused to believe them, I said I wanted to go to Ray's foster mother and ask, but instead they bundled me in their car and took me to his graveside."

"His graveside?" Meli was incredulous.

"There was a gravestone with his date of birth and date of death. It was all there, he was gone and I had missed my chance at telling him what happened." I let out a long breath, I was almost done. The rest I'd only learned recently, "My parents arranged for me to marry Ashton's brother. I was so stupid then, looking back now I can't believe how I blindly followed their advice. They told me that the only chance I had of having a good life was if I married Conrad, apparently, he'd always liked me. The thought of marrying into the family of my attacker was beyond crazy, but I learned that Ashton had been admitted to a long-stay psychiatric hospital. My parents told me not to breathe a word about the father of my baby, that if anyone asked, then to tell

them it was Raymond's. I wanted the baby to be his so badly, if I couldn't tell him I was sorry, then the least I could do would be to raise his child, but I knew she couldn't be his. But that was the official story, that I was pregnant by my dead biker boyfriend. I realize now that my parents came to an agreement with Conrad and Ashton's father, in return for not pressing charges and scandalizing the entire Whitmore family, they would get a monthly stipend. Conrad also got money from his parents for putting up with me and my daughter."

"This is shocking!" Meli exclaimed, "And your husband, was he in on this too? This is the man who shot you, no?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. I don't think so. Our marriage was unconventional, we never loved each other but he wasn't an unkind man. Though in hindsight, I suppose if he had been forced to marry me to save his brother from criminal charges then he might have been bitter. Things changed when his brother was released from hospital last year. Conrad started drinking heavily and acting erratically. I wondered if maybe he was suffering from the same problems that his brother did."

"And your parents, Rage tells me that you are not in contact with them?" Meli asks.

"After the marriage our relationship got more strained, they left to live on the East Coast, and we don't talk. I guess I blamed them for everything, for telling me not to report the attack, and for making me marry Conrad. And since I learned that they faked Ray's death and told him I didn't want anything to do with him and had moved on, I think that blame is justified."

Meli was silent for a moment. She shoved the bowl of hulled strawberries to the side of the table and took a hold of my hand, "You have to tell Rage all this."

"But what good would it do?" I say.

“As I told you before, I have eyes that see. I see Mia and I see Rage, don’t be so sure that he isn’t her father, you need to tell him this.”

I knew I did, but that would be a discussion for another day and Meli promised that she would not breathe a word to Rage. Thankfully after I’d gotten all that off my chest, I felt lighter than I had in years. Though perhaps the generous glass of wine I’d drunk had helped.

We continue chatting for almost an hour, until my wine has all disappeared into my belly along with some lovely gourmet cheeses and wheat crackers. I saw Meli send out a few texts, but I couldn’t manage to feel any genuine curiosity. All I feel is warm and peaceful on the inside after telling someone my deepest, darkest secret. This is about the time that I realize that I can’t really drive because I drank a bit too much. The idea pops into my head that maybe we can put one of the bikes into the back of Rage’s truck and one of my escorts can drive us back to Rage’s place.

Meli puts some croissants into a container and gestures for me to stand up. My feet wobble a bit, “I can’t drive, Meli.”

“Of course not, ma petite ,” she says as she links her arm with mine. “I asked someone to help.”

When we step outside, Rage is standing by his truck waiting on us. He was supposed to be working on that project with his club brothers today, but he came here instead. Even in my tipsy condition. I feel myself turning red with embarrassment, only for Meli to step closer and shove a huge bottle of wine into my hands. “You have been through much and deserve to relax. Remember, talking is good.”

I give her a tight hug, because this woman genuinely understands how hard life can be sometimes. She might not be Rage’s birth mother, but she clearly cares for him, and I am so happy he has someone like this in his life.

Rage steps out to meet me, slides the bottle of wine out from under my arm and places it in a box behind his seat. As well as the croissants there are other delicious things. I assume her staff loaded him up with breakfast leftovers.

“You feeling better, Prissy?”

I nod, giving him my best smile. “Yesterday kind of sucked but last night and this morning more than made up for it.”

His face lights up at my genuine compliment. “I’m off for the rest of the day, so we can do whatever you like.”

Mia squeals, “Can we see a movie and go out for ice cream?”

Rage smothers back a smile. “We sure can. Did you have a movie in mind?”

“I’m dying to see Evolution of the Clone. It’s sci-fi and it’s really good. Everyone has been talking about it.”

Rage responds thoughtfully. “I’ve heard it’s a freaking thrill a minute. Do you want to call any of your friends? We can pick them up if they want to join the fun.”

Mia jumps for joy, causing Barley to come running over to see what all the excitement is about. Out comes her cellphone and she begins texting away. Rage wraps one arm around me and gently draws me closer. But instead of talking to me, he talks to Meli. “See, I did good, didn’t I?”

It takes my alcohol-addled brain a second to realize he’s subtly asking her if picking Mia and me was a good idea.

Meli gives him an indulgent smile. I don’t even know how to handle all the niceness

inherent in this morning. It enables me to finally relax and let my guard down. It doesn't even occur to me to feel guilty about drinking the wine Meli offered me or nibbling on cheese for breakfast. Apparently, breaking the rules occasionally is considered a virtue in Rage and Meli's world.

Meli walks around to speak with Rage before he gets into the driver's seat. Whatever they talk about has him frowning for a few moments and I had an awful thought that she is telling him what I'd just told her. She catches my eye and gives a curt shake of her head, but when Rage isn't looking, she mouths, 'talk to him' at me.

I start to relax and enjoy the wine buzz, when I giggle like a drunken co-ed Rage smiles indulgently at me. He's the kind of guy that's really handsome but a smile makes him twice as attractive.

We drive around picking up Siege's daughter, Louisa, and Rider's daughter, Amy. The three girls turn into chatterboxes in the back of Rage's truck, all crammed on those little seats, grazing on things from the food bags. They're all whispering about how lucky Mia is to have Meli for a grandma. They think that she's Mia's grandmother by virtue of the fact that we're living with Rage and present like a couple. I let that roll around in my head for a moment, especially given what Meli said about Rage's allergy. I don't know how that works, can allergies be inherited? I do need to talk to Rage, but I also need to know if he is Mia's father. I don't want to spring one possible surprise on him and take it away with the other hand when DNA tests show he isn't her father. Maybe that's what I should do first? I need to see if I can get a DNA test done and then I can talk to him and tell him the whole truth.

I'm dragged out from my musings by the sound of giggling, Rage must have said something funny because all three girls are laughing so hard tears are running down their faces, and I feel like my heart is about to burst. My little girl needs this in her

life. Feeling warm and happy, I find myself daydreaming about how nice it would be to have this kind of friendship and support in our lives full time and forever. When I glance over at Rage, he's sneaking glances at me as well. This whole situation feels like what a true family should be.

Once we're at the movie theater, we take the girls to the concession stand and buy them popcorn, chocolate, and soda pops. They're excited and having the time of their lives, I guess in these days of streaming TV and twenty-four-hour movie channels, actual cinema trips are becoming a rarity.

When we settle down into our seats, I lean over and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. I'm just so happy to be spending time with him again. I rest my head on his shoulder as the preview starts playing. I can't believe how everything goes off without a hitch. There is no arguing, bullying, or snarky comments. I realize on the way home that this is how life is supposed to be, just nice people spending relaxing time together.

Mia's special day turns into a pajama party when the other two ask to stay over. Rage honestly doesn't seem bothered having his house invaded by a bunch of tweens, nor does he seem to be aware that this is the most amazing social experience my daughter has ever had. When we were with Conrad, life was so restrictive. Once more I wonder if Conrad knew the truth about what his brother had done, I'd thought he was angry and resented being married to me, but maybe some of that resentment was from him having to clear up his brother's mess and put his own plans on hold. It might explain why he started to go off the rails when Ashton was released from the psychiatric hospital.

The girls play in the yard with Mister Boots and the prospects, as the stern-faced brother looks on, I wonder if he's been sent to check up on them or monitor that they're doing their jobs correctly. Does prospecting work that way? Another prospect shows up after a couple of hours with a package that he takes inside. When I wander

into the house to see what he's doing I see him and Rage setting up a small white tent in front of the large screen TV in the living room. They throw in a blow-up mattress, bedding, toss cushions, large bowls of snacks and drape fairy lights around the entrance. I literally don't know how Rage does it, but he makes everything look easy.

By this time, I'm just staring at them as they literally make the kind of magic that children really appreciate. God, I want this man to be Mia's dad in the worst way possible, but looking at him with her, the thought comes to my mind that even if I was right all along and her father is Ashton, that Rage might still want us as a family.

Rage, still on his knees after finishing the lights jokes, "Prissy girl, don't look so impressed. I didn't make this up all on my own. Siege's old lady does this for the kids. I just borrowed her idea."

I kneel down in front of him and take his hands in mine. "This is still a really wonderful thing you're doing, babe. Not many men really get kids, especially girls. You're doing a bang-up job of making my daughter's life better than it ever was before."

His eyebrows fly up. "You have got to be shitting me. This is beginners keeping kids distracted activities." Reaching into his bag, he pulls out two movies. Shaking one, he says, " Kids in Space or Kid Spies ? Which one do you think they'll like the best?"

I fling my arms around his neck and give him a kiss, hopefully, one he won't soon forget. "Thank you for taking us in and for being so nice to us. After everything we've been through we really needed you in our life."

He eases up back onto the floor and rolls us over, putting me on top. Pulling the twist out of my hair and raking his fingers through it, he looks into my eyes and says, "Tell me more about how amazing I am. That shit never gets old,"

Suddenly, there is giggling from three little girls and Mia is holding out a glass jar. “You can’t last an hour without saying a bad word, Rage.”

He sighs, sits up and digs through his pockets to fetch a dollar. He drops it into the jar and asks, “How much do we have so far?”

Mia replies, “Thirty-one dollars. I’ve been counting each and every time you put money in the jar.”

Rage groans, “That much? I must be cursing way more than I thought.”

My daughter replies sagely, “That’s the way bad habits are. Try to think before you curse.”

I think for a second that Rage is going to get mad, but he just chuckles and rubs the back of his neck like he’s embarrassed, and asks, “What do you think we should spend the money on when the jar is full?”

Mia shrugs, “I don’t know. Whatever you want. I have everything I’ve ever wanted and can’t think of a single thing I need.”

Rage laughs, “Beach vacation it is then.”

Mia is practically vibrating with excitement at the prospect of a beach vacation. “That’s a fantastic idea! Can Louisa and Amy come too?”

Rage agrees before she even gets the words out, “Of course, if their parents say it’s okay. Friends make everything better.”

I slowly turn my head to look at him as Mia skips away to talk to her friends about the beach. I realize there is a double meaning in his words.

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Rage

My attempt to be eyes on with Malcolm Whitmore blew apart yesterday when Meli texted to let me know that Priscilla needed me. She sent me some cryptic message about how I should talk to her about the past and her daughter. The only thing I can make out of the situation is that Meli thinks I need to be more welcoming of Mia and she's worried I might not want to look after another man's kid. Little does the woman know that I'm already spoiling that little girl so hard Priscilla is giving me the side eye.

Anyway, this morning I'm giving it another shot. I slide up beside Venom on the ridgeline giving us the best view of the Whitmore estate.

"You look like shit, man."

He drops his binoculars and glares at me with bloodshot eyes. "Amy keeps getting up to go to the bathroom at night, she says the baby is pressing on her bladder. I've barely gotten a full night's sleep in three weeks."

I grin at him, "You think that's bad, just wait until Venom Junior arrives. Say goodbye to a good night's sleep for the next... what... eighteen years?"

"Fuck off," he grumbles.

I knew he was going to pop off, so I slide a bag of his mom's morning croissants over in front of him and an extra-large coffee. "Am I forgiven? Fresh out the oven."

He opens the bag, and his eyes drift closed as he inhales. “Fuck yes, you are more than forgiven.” Reaching over with his free arm he wraps it around my neck and jerks me down into a headlock, laughing his ass off as I do my best to escape.

“Get your sweaty armpit away from me, you stupid fucker,” I growl through gritted teeth.

I elbow him in the ribs, and he leaves off with the roughhousing.

I reach into his bag and pull out a croissant before he can stop me. “That will cost you one whole croissant.”

He snatches the bag away, frowning at me.

Before he can complain, I tell him, “You don’t need six fucking breakfast croissants, dude. With how good your mom’s food is, I’m surprised we’re not both fat as fucking pigs.”

He thumps his fist against his hard abs. “You’re the one who needs to hit the gym more, not me. Getting a dad bod there, my friend.”

“Yeah, whatever, asshole” I respond blandly. Good job Mia isn’t around to hear my language, or I’d probably owe her another fifty dollars. Jerking my chin towards the Whitmore estate, I ask, “Have you see this fucker?”

He takes a bite of the croissant and chews it before responding in a serious tone. “I’ve not seen anything remotely resembling a human being in or around that fucking mansion. No Malcolm Whitmore or his weird ass son, Ashton. Not a groundskeeper, housekeeper, or whoever else rich fuckers have to look after them.”

“That’s strange,” I say staring at the huge house.

Venom adds, “The lights come on and go off, randomly throughout the house, so someone has to be home.”

A deep voice comes from behind us. “The lights are probably set on an automatic timer as part of their security plan.”

Venom automatically holds out his bag for Tex to take a croissant.

Tex pulls out a fat, juicy croissant, loaded with eggs, sausage, and cheese. Meli thought it sacrilege to fill a croissant like this, but when everyone kept asking for breakfast croissants she relented and trialed her own version which ended up becoming a best seller on her breakfast menu.

I can tell Tex is in heaven when he takes a bite, because his fucking eyes practically roll back in his head. “Your mom is the best cook on the West Coast. You do know that, don’t you, Venom?”

Venom grins. “I already got one blood brother, you looking to be adopted by my family too?”

Tex just shakes his head with a smirk. “Nah, I’m not gonna come between you and your fucking bromance.”

“Fuck off,” Rage and I both say in unison.

We take a few minutes to eat in silence before Tex speaks up. “I’m gonna fetch some more coffee and supplies. If we’re gonna be here all day, then we don’t wanna be distracted by hunger.”

I jerk my chin for him to go, wondering how much experience he had with stakeouts when he was a Texas Ranger. They drive some brothers right up the wall, but Tex

seems quite chipper about it.

We keep an eye on the house for most of the day, true to his word Tex kept us topped up with fresh coffee and made sure we didn't get hungry. That stereotype about cops and donuts? Given the sugar-dusted ones he brought us with our lunchtime coffee and burgers, there must be some truth in it. I guess carbs and sugar keeps the blood sugar from dipping, though after this stakeout I'm gonna need me some gym time.

When Tex comes back after dark with a pizza, we all sit around watching the house. Venom complains, "We've had club brothers here for the better part of twenty-four hours off and on. We've yet to see any sign of life. Obviously because it's such a massive place with thick walls I can't use my thermal imaging drones, but other than the lights, there's no fucking activity."

Tex sighs, "How long are y'all thinking of staking out this place before y'all break down and check the house to see if anyone is even home?"

My head snaps around to look at Venom. "Tex's right. We've been here long enough, we need to eliminate this as a potential capture site for Malcolm. The old man could be dancing with show girls in Vegas or sunning himself on the French Riviera for all we know."

Venom finishes his slice of pizza and grins at me. "I'm game for a little breaking and entering tonight." He wipes his greasy fingers on his jeans and pulls out his gloves then looks from Tex back to me.

Tex curses under his breath. "Fucking boy scouts." Reaching into the black leather duffle bag he brought, he pulls out a set of overalls and tosses them to Venom, then takes out another set for me.

“What the fuck is this all about?” I ask.

Tex gets to his feet and begins pulling on the solid black garment. By the time he zips it up, I see the benefit with my own eyes. Against a black backdrop he looks almost invisible. Reaching into his pocket he pulls out thick black rubber gloves and a ski mask. By the time he’s geared up, his fucking mother wouldn’t recognize him.

“I’m guessing y’all probably have your DNA in the system? I know mine is on file from my previous life. This way we don’t leave any evidence.”

He’s right, because in my job as a medic I often end up at crime scenes, I’ve been asked to provide a sample for exclusion on a couple of occasions. They say it’s destroyed after the case is closed, but I ain’t taking any chances, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Venom and I scramble to get into our overalls as well. Tex pulls out a case with a sniper rifle fitted with a silencer. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t totally fascinated by the new guy. When he was prospecting, he just kept his head down and did as he was told, now he’s a fully patched in brother we’re learning all sorts of interesting shit about him. He raises his rifle and shoots at a transformer on a nearby power pole. He keeps shooting and reloading until the transformer pops. Then he states, “We’ve probably got about ten or fifteen minutes until the utility companies show up and call the police.”

We scramble down and do a circuit of the house to check for signs of life. Looking through the lower floor windows with our night vision goggles there’s no heat signatures. It’s too early for anyone to be in bed, so it’s pretty safe to assume the house is empty. I run up to the back door, I was gonna try and force it, but Tex moves me aside and starts getting to work with a bunch of tools. He makes short work of it and a minute or so later there’s a soft click as it opens just as if someone used a key. The power’s out so we don’t have to worry about any security systems. We begin searching the house for Malcolm or Ashton, each of us taking a different floor. Once we get out of the main living area, I know we’re not going to find anyone here

because the fucker has moved. Every other room is totally empty except the spacious living room. It doesn't take us long to regroup and head out the way we came.

Venom is pissed. "This has been a gigantic waste of time."

Tex peels off his overalls and crams them back into the duffle. "We need to get the fuck outta here before the police show up, once the utility repair men see the bullet holes, they're gonna freak."

Ven and I pull off ours as well, put them in the duffle and then load up and get the hell out of dodge. When we're miles away, we stop to refuel.

Tex steps closer and asks, "Do you think we should check the house where Priscilla used to live? What are the chances he's there?"

I shrug, "Pretty much zero. It's still a crime scene, isn't it?"

"Nope," Tex says. "Got released back to the Whitmores last week, they had a cleanup crew come out. I don't know what they're planning on doing with the place, it's not listed for sale."

Venom chimes in, "I'd be willing to do this all in one fell swoop. We need to find this dude. If there's a chance he's hiding out there, then we need to check."

I agree so we head in that direction.

Pulling up to the house gives me the creeps, not because a man died here but because Priscilla was shot here. We gear up again and slip in through the back again because it can't be seen from the street. The electricity is already off, maybe like someone didn't pay the bill or it got turned off by the old man. Our flashlights come in handy, and we stay together on this one. It's pretty clear that no one is living here, the living

room carpet has been taken away, as have the sofas and there's a strong smell of bleach and chemicals in the air. I see fruit is rotting on the dining room table in a large bowl, I guess the cleanup crew were only focusing on the biohazards.

"This brings back memories," Tex mutters under his breath. I assume he means because he used to be a law enforcement officer and saw a lot of crime scenes and knows that the absence of soft furnishings means that the blood splatter was extensive.

Venom has nothing to say, and I can't see his expression.

"Priscilla hasn't got any of her, or Mia's personal items. Maybe we can collect that for her?" I suggest.

"Good idea," Tex replies. "Asshole isn't here, so we may as well make it worth our while." We head upstairs.

When I walk into Mia's room my heart breaks. She has so few little kid items and no décor on her walls, I wouldn't say it's a prison cell but seeing how she's already made her room at mine look cozy, it's heart breaking to think she lived in this stark white room. I remember Priscilla saying Conrad didn't like her room to be junked up. Well fuck that dead bastard because I've crammed her room full of useless shit that little girls like. I walk over and dump the pillow out of the pillowcase and begin filling it with her stuff. She's got a little jewelry box, some stuffed animals, and figurines of cats all lined up on a shelf. I take everything I can get my hands on with my club brothers silently watching me. If she doesn't want these reminders of her old life, then we can give them to Goodwill or something.

I move to the master bedroom, and it's weirdly separated into two halves. One is masculine and the other is feminine. On Priscilla's half there's a space where a computer used to be. I can tell because the cables were left behind. I grab her jewelry

box, which isn't much larger than Mia's, and throw it into my pillowcase. Tex grabs another pillowcase and holds it out while I start filling it to the brim with all Priscilla's personal effects. I open her closet and seriously don't know what to take because it's mostly demure clothing for a life she doesn't live anymore. I'm just about to leave the walk-in closet when Tex kicks something metal.

"You want me to grab the safe? It's probably got her important paperwork inside."

"Yeah, thanks."

On the way out I shine my flashlight over the nightstand drawer on Conrad's side and see that he has lots of embarrassing things hidden there, porn, Viagra, and lotion in addition to his rolodex and some expensive looking cufflinks. I slam the drawer shut and don't say a word, because I refuse to continue to let this asshole and his peculiarities live rent free in my head.

We take the personal property we've reclaimed for Priscilla and Mia and hit the road, strapping it to the back of our bikes. It's all kinds of awkward but worth it. It infuriates me that these females I care so much about can stow all their worldly possession in two jumbo size pillowslips. Conrad's family is wealthy. Why they were too stingy to spend on Priscilla and Mia is beyond my ability to reason.

We pull up at my place almost an hour after leaving their old house and my club brothers help me unload our haul and set the stuff just inside the front door. We say our goodbyes and they head off home. It's around eight in the evening and I smell something tasty. I wander through the house, following my nose to the kitchen to find Priscilla removing chicken from a roasting pan, ready to put in the refrigerator.

I lean over and inhale, "Umm, lemon chicken?" I ask.

She nods, “I thought you’d be late, so me and the girls have already eaten. Want me to warm some back up for you?”

I shake my head, reach into the roaster and rip off a chunk of white meat with my hands. She watches me bite off a large piece and comments, “You’re acting like a real caveman tonight.”

I walk off my piece of chicken, motioning for her to follow. “I feel like a caveman because I’ve been hunting and gathering for you tonight.”

“What in the world does that even mean?” she asks with a quizzical look on her face.

I don’t need to answer because the moment she sees the safe that was hidden away in her walk-in closet, she rushes forward and falls to her knees in front of the pillowcases. “Oh my God! You brought stuff from our old house.”

I sit down on the bench in my foyer and continue eating my chicken while she unties the pillowcases.

“I cleaned out Mia’s room and grabbed as much as I could from your side of the bedroom. I didn’t know if you’d want the reminders, but thought I’d let you and Mia decide. One of my club brothers noticed the safe and we somehow managed to wrestle it onto the back of his Harley.”

She tears up, but I wave my piece of chicken to get her attention. “No crying Prissy girl. Those Whitmore bastards wouldn’t give you your shit, so I took it. If they’ve got a problem with that, they can take it up with me and my club.”

She gives me gigantic hug before running to the bottom of the stairs and calling for Mia. She comes down with her two friends looking all kinds of confused. “What’s up?”

Priscilla waves Mia over. “Rage stopped by our old house and grabbed a bunch of our stuff. Come, let’s see what he brought.”

Mia can’t get to the pillowcases fast enough. Delighted is the word I’d use to describe her expression. “It feels like Christmas morning, only I don’t have to worry about not liking my gifts because I’m the one who picked them out.”

The other two girls kneel down beside her and help her open and gently empty the pillowcases.

The first thing Mia grabs is a weird white, half-bald stuffed cat. She hugs the toy to her chest and starts crying.

Her mom explains, “This was a gift from an aunt who passed away. She gave it to Mia when she was born, that tatty cat used to go everywhere with Mia.” Turning to me, she says, “Thank you, Rage. Getting back Whiskers means so much to her.”

Trying to lighten the mood I respond lightly, “I got your jewelry cases too.”

They get excited about that and open the other pillowcase to claim their girly trinkets. Pride blooms in my chest that I’ve managed to get some justice on their behalf. It’s the very least they deserve for everything they’ve had to endure.

Priscilla’s chicken is finger-licking good, so I grab another piece while I watch them divvy up their possessions. Mia’s friends make a big deal about her little crystal cat collection. They help her carry her stuff upstairs and when her bedroom door closes, we can no longer hear their laughter.

I watch Priscilla neatly pack her stuff back into one of the pillowcases and turn her attention to the safe. I come over and pick it up. “Want me to put it on the dining room table, so you can get to it better.”

She nods, all smiles. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you doing this for us. We don’t have much, but there are some things of sentimental value that can never be replaced.”

“I’m glad to be of service, Prissy. You deserve to have all your nice things.”

I watch as she dials in the correct combination and scans her finger across the scanner. The safe pops open and I’m shocked that there’s a bundle of cash stowed inside. She reaches inside and takes it out. When she hands it to me, I can see that it says ten thousand dollars on the paper band. “Here you go, repayment for all the nice things you bought us.”

I push the money back and tell her. “I’m not taking your money, Prissy. I’m doing just fine on my own. You’re gonna need that to buy a car and for Mia’s college fund.”

I can see she’s gonna argue the point, so I tell her in no uncertain terms, “Your money is no good here. Seriously, the club got a windfall on one of our last jobs.”

She slaps the end against her palm and responds, “I guess it’s foolish to give it away when we’re broke.”

She replaces it back in the safe and pulls out a jewelry case. She opens it and shows me a rather lackluster pair of gold earrings. “These aren’t real gold, but they were a gift from one of my best friends when I was little.”

She paws through the safe, pulling out the diamond earrings her grandmother bequeathed to her and the gold bracelet she got from her mother on her fifteenth birthday. She has a lot of trinkets both valuable and not, that mean something to her. She’s even got an old silk scarf that I gave to her. When I saw it, I did a double take. I remembered the day I gave it to her like it was yesterday. Back then I couldn’t afford

much, I was living in foster care and broke. I'd actually gotten it from a thrift store, I felt bad about giving her something that had belonged to someone else, but the way her eyes lit up when I presented it to her, it was like I'd given her diamonds.

There's also a thick file folder in the safe, but she doesn't show any interest in it whatsoever. I'd almost forgotten what else I'd picked up, Whitmore had taken her laptop, but I found her cellphone under a book on the nightstand, "Got this as well," I said as I handed it to her.

She took it from me but looked fairly disinterested, I'd gotten her a new phone saying she could let everyone know she was okay. But the look on her face when she said that she had no one to call was heartbreaking.

"Thanks," she says and puts it on the coffee table, not even bothering to switch it on.

I need to talk to her about what we discovered today.

"We found out that your father-in-law pulled up stakes and moved. Me and a couple of my club brothers went to his mini mansion and there was no one living there anymore. The whole house was empty except the furniture in the living room."

"Is that why you went to our old home? You were hoping to find him there."

I nod. "We knew it was a longshot, the crime scene has been cleaned up, but the house has been left with bare floorboards and there was rotten fruit in the bowl. The electricity is off, and the door was boarded up."

"That's horrible. Why did Malcolm take the house from us if he didn't care anything about it?"

"I don't know but we need to locate either Malcolm or his son Ashton, preferably

both. Do you have any idea where they are?"

Something flashes over her face when she hears the name Ashton. I want to ask her what it is about him she doesn't like, but I don't want to spoil her good mood about getting her personal items back. She thinks it over for a few seconds before answering. "I was of the understanding that they had property all over. Maybe losing Conrad really messed him and he took off to another part of the country." Pausing for a moment, she adds, "I know they have a place in Italy because we visited it once. I hesitate to think how many places Malcolm could go if he really wanted to disappear."

"Our IT guy has been tracking his holdings and they're all owned by shell companies hidden within shell companies."

She slowly closes her safe and turns to me. "Do you really think Malcolm had something do with the rabbits?"

"I can't think of anyone else who would be angry enough with you to do something like that."

She glances away and again there's a strange look on her face. "I know he probably blames me for Conrad's death. Malcolm never liked me and tried to blame me for everything that went wrong in their lives."

"That must have been awful," I say while pulling her close to me on the sofa. "Did Conrad defend you to his father at least?"

She shakes her head. "No, he never did. He usually agreed with whatever his father said. He did whatever his father asked. It's like our marriage, I don't think he had any say in that either."

Priscilla

Rage holds me and lets me talk about the things I went through while married to Conrad. Everything but the thing that he needs to know.

I couldn't bring myself to tell him about Ashton, or about Meli's suspicions—which were my suspicions now, too. When he was out, I'd taken a look through his sideboard. I felt like a criminal rummaging through his personal belongings, I didn't really know what I was looking for until I found it—his old military dog tags. His blood group is O, same as Mia's. Mine is A, Conrad's was B, I don't know about his brother, but with everything else I'm starting to believe Meli. Rage is Mia's father. I need to tell him, but I'm scared in case I'm wrong. I decide that tomorrow I'm going to see if I can get some of his hair and get a paternity test done. The thought that Rage really could be Mia's father causes excitement to bubble up in me and for the first time in forever I feel hopeful. He's sweet, understanding, and supportive. Everything I could ever ask for in a man. By the time we call lights out on the girls, it's close to eleven. They were fighting sleep and complained about us turning the lights out, but I noticed their eyes were getting drowsy and they conked out pretty quickly.

When I join him in the hallway, he has a soft smile on his face. "You're a good mom, Prissy girl. I always knew you would be." Wrapping his arm around me, he gives me a little kiss on the forehead.

"Thanks, Rage. Mia is my whole world."

As we walk to his room, he says, "Do you reckon you've got room in that world for anyone else? Maybe a certain biker medic." His voice turns serious for a minute, "I'm

falling for you hard Prissy, I don't think I ever totally fell out of love with you. I want us to make a go of it, you reckon we'd work?"

I grin at him feeling like the happiest woman in the world. "I think I could definitely find a Rage-sized space for you."

Picking me up, he throws me over his shoulder and carries me into his room. I giggle at his over-the-top display, "Now I wanna be inside my woman," he says before throwing me down on his bed.

I look up at his face, his eyes are heavy-lidded and he's smiling down at me. "Are you trying to get me all hot and bothered with this caveman act?"

He grabs one leg and takes my shoe off, and then the other, before tackling my pants. "No Prissy girl, I'm hoping you're already hot and bothered knowing what my tongue is about to do to you."

I find myself smiling slowly and he traces my mouth with his finger, "I'm just addicted to your smiles. Since you've come back into my life, all I want to do is make you laugh and make up for all those years we lost. I missed my Prissy girl."

I lay on my back staring up at him, as he pulls my pants off. Pulling all my blonde hair to one side, I rake my fingers through it. It's an anxious habit from a long time ago. "Why do you call me Prissy girl?"

He leans over the bed on two muscular arms and looks into my eyes. "It was my way of saying you were the most beautiful, feminine thing I'd ever set my eyes on. All the other girls were okay, but you were spectacular, gorgeous, sweet, kind, and above all you were respectful. I want a name for you that only I could use. No matter how long this thing between us lasts, whether it's a month, a year or a lifetime, you're always going to be my Prissy girl."

When his hand comes out to divest me of my shirt, I jump forward and fling myself into his arms. A thousand thoughts are swarming around in my head. I want to tell him about Mia, about my thoughts. But just now he's hinted that maybe what we have doesn't have legs. I feel like I'm on an emotional rollercoaster, but I have to get my mind back onto the present.

I pull him into a kiss, intending to let him know just how much I care about him, hoping that he can read everything in that kiss. Read all those words I'm too scared to say out loud. I want him to be mine, I want us to be a family, I want him to be Mia's father in any or every way he can be. Within moments we're both naked and he's once again standing over me, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of lust and love. When I try to pull him down, he doesn't come. Instead he leans over and kisses me, taking his time to trail kisses down my neck and lavishing attention on my breasts. Every touch is designed to spike my arousal and make me wet for him. It's like this man can remember every single thing that ever turned me on and uses it to stoke my arousal higher and higher.

When I'm whispering how much I need him, he still doesn't give me his cock. Instead he gives me his devilish tongue. Nothing in this world is more pleasurable than Rage's tongue, except maybe his cock. Kneeling before my spread legs seems for all the world to be Rage's happy place. He takes his time, using his tongue to lap sensually over the top of my clit, while his hands slide over my body, tweaking my nipples until I come the first time for him. He doesn't ease back though. Nope, he slides a finger inside me and then two. He knows how to give me everything I could possibly need from a lover. Between this tongue and his talented fingers, I'm coming all over the place a second time.

Finally, after that, he relents and give me his cock. He pulls me out of bed and puts my back against the wall. I help hold myself up by wrapping my arms around his neck. It's also a great position to grab a few more of his sexy kisses, so that's exactly what I do, tasting myself on his tongue.

He cradles one leg in each arm and slowly lowers me onto my cock. I feel open and vulnerable in this position.

“You okay, baby? He asks.

I nod my head. “Insanely good. How about you?” I ask.

“Better than I ever was when you were gone,” he responds, and he begins moving in and out of my body with a fevered roughness that really hit the spot tonight.

“There’s no better feeling in the entire world than being full of you, baby.”

He begins lifting me more enthusiastically and dropping me so down hard that I beg him to stop and then beg him to do it some more. Truth be told, I’m a hot, sweaty, compliant mess and I don’t even know what I want. Rage knows though and he gives it to me stroke by stroke, making me come a third time.

Then he puts me on the bed on my hands and knees and does it all over again. By the time he finally allows himself to come for the first time, I’m face down on the blankets, gasping for breath. My entire body is trembling, but I know all the way down to my bones that if he suggested it again, I’d move heaven and earth to pull myself together for him to go another round.

And that, in my world, is true love. I love this man with all my heart, and nothing will ever change that. I decide in this moment that tomorrow I’ll tell him about Mia and Ashton and the real reason I ran off, I don’t know how long DNA tests take, but deep in my heart I feel that whatever the results show, this man will be there for us. I feel Rage’s arms pull me close as he curls his big body around mine and we tumble off to sleep, sated and happy.

Rage

If anyone had told me a few months ago that my house was gonna become a day spa and beauty salon for little girls, then I'd have told them where to go. Sleepovers seem to be Mia's new favorite thing, and given what her life was like before, I can't do anything but indulge her.

I don't know about this newest activity Mia and her friends want to do. I'm letting Priscilla sleep late this morning after I wore her out last night. Plus she'd had the girls alone all day yesterday while I was out doing surveillance, so it was only fair that I did my bit. I looked at the assorted bottles on the counter and I had watched five instructional videos, and the parents have approved this idea—yet I was still more terrified than ever. It's just the execution that I'm worried about. I would feel worlds better if they waited until Priscilla wakes up, but Mia wants to surprise her mom with what she calls the full effect .

I lift Mia up first, then Louisa, and little Amy last, lining each of them up onto the counter in back mud room. We're being watched by Mister Boots who's giving us the side-eye. He looks about as confused as I feel.

The girls are super excited as I pull out the little pot of temporary hair dye. "Are you sure you want to go through with this? You can still change your mind."

Mia shoots back, "We're not changing our minds."

Amy adds, "It was hard talking Dad into giving permission. I'm not taking any chances on him changing his mind."

I give Louisa a questioning look. She quickly speaks up, “I’m all in. I know everyone expects me to chicken out but I’m not gonna.”

I set the container down, put both hands on the counter and ask, “Where do you want your purple streak, in the front, side, or back?”

I know they discussed this extensively last night, between ghost stories. After a momentary pause, Mia speaks up, “We decided on the right side near the front.”

Amy nods her approval. “We’re gonna braid them because it will make the purple streak more noticeable.”

“Alright, but you know that since we’re not bleaching or lightening your hair, the color won’t be exactly the same on all of you.”

Mia responds, “We thought about that. It’s the reason we decided to put it in the same place on our head.”

“You got it, pumpkin,” I quip as I glove up.”

The girls giggle, whether it’s because of my pet name for Mia or because they’re bursting with excitement, I’m not sure.

As I’m prepping the supplies, I’m in fucking wonder at myself. I never in my life thought I’d be doing half the shit I have been. At first, looking after Mia was to help Priscilla while she was in hospital. I didn’t know what I was doing, but somehow muddled through it. As the weeks wore on, I realized that Mia is a pretty neat kid, and I enjoyed doing things with her. She looked up to me and respected me. I never had that as a kid getting kicked from one placement to another, so it made me feel good to be able to step in when she needed someone. I’ve been holding back with Priscilla, because part of me was shit scared of getting hurt again, but I realize that you can’t

live your life scared of heartbreak. Sometimes you just gotta jump in and go for it. I want Prissy back and I want to be a father to this little girl. It's fucking massive but seeing her and her friends this morning is just making me even more sure of my decision.

Each of them holds still as I section out a chunk of hair on the right side of their head and isolate it using aluminum foil. I learned from the videos I watched that this is the best way to ensure I don't dribble the hair dye on the rest of their hair. The last thing in the world I need is to end up making a sloppy mess.

Mia complains, "You're taking too long. I can't sit still this long."

I stop long enough to grab Mister Boots and put him in her lap. "Want to know the difference between a good idea and a horrible one?"

She nods as Boots settles down on her lap.

"It's execution. We're gonna do this right or not at all, okay?"

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, but you're almost done, right?"

I give her a decisive nod. "Yes ma'am, I most certainly am. Now, hold still for just a few more minutes."

The other two are much more patient and I had all three of them prepped in no time. The second I open the container of hair dye, Boots hisses, jumps down, and runs off.

I try not to do the same because the concoction I'm supposed to put on their hair smells nasty, even though it's natural and kid safe.

Mia wrinkles her nose.

“Did you change your mind, pumpkin?” I ask in a teasing tone.

She shakes her head enthusiastically.

I dip the application brush into the dye and paint all the way down the strand, getting a little extra for good measure. Then I fold it over to keep the dye from drying out while it did its thing.

Amy says excitedly, “Do me next.”

So, I do. By the time I get to quiet Lousia, she was showing more enthusiasm. I set the timer on my phone and the girls all turn around to look into the gigantic wall mirror behind the long eight-foot counter. I don’t know at what age kids can manage to sit on a counter without falling off, so I stand guard over them like some overprotective helicopter parent.

When the alarm on my phone goes off, I carefully lean them over the sink and rinse the locks of purple hair. By the time I finish, we marvel that there really isn’t that much of a difference between the shade of purple they ended up with. I can’t help but wonder if the other brothers do things like this with their kids. They must, right?

Louisa and Amy want to get down to braid each other’s new purple strands, but Mia is content to just stare at her new purple streak in the mirror. Although her back is to me, when I gaze into the mirror, I can see her happy expression as she turns her head back and forth to catch the light shining down from overhead.

I do a double take.

The thing is, I can see me too. And for the first time, I realize how much we look alike. She has the same thick wiry brown shoulder hair that I do, only I keep mine tied back at the nape of my neck and Mia’s spills down over her shoulders. Her eyes

are the same shade of green as mine. She has a similar complexion, and her nose is very similar to mine. The resemblance is uncanny. I daresay she looks more like me than her own mother.

A strange idea springs forth from the back of my mind as I stand there comparing our features. Mia could pass for my child. Suddenly, it feels like someone punched me in the gut. Priscilla taking off and everything that happened after. I know what her parents told her—that I was dead, and I’d seen my own fucking grave to prove it—but what if she’d confessed to them that she was pregnant, and they’d started all this as a way to get me out of her life? They’d made it clear that they thought I was no good, and any person who’d get a fake headstone made was capable of anything. Had Priscilla been involved? She seemed so genuine when she told me her version of events, but had she told me everything?

I calmly ask Mia, “What do you know about your father? Your real father, I mean, not Conrad.”

Mia looks sad for a moment, “I don’t know much, Mommy said he died.”

I felt a chill start to creep up my spine, “When’s your birthday, pumpkin?”

Her eyes lift to mine, and she answers without hesitation, “My birthday was seven months ago. Only five more months and I’ll be eleven.”

I freeze in place, as I do the math, it all adds up. I force myself to smile and to act normal. “Best be thinking about what you want your next birthday to look like, pumpkin. It’ll be here before you realize it.”

She scrambles down off the counter, all smiles. “Don’t worry, I won’t go overboard.”

Looking down into her adorable little face, the one that kind of looks like mine, I ask

in a teasing tone, “Now where’s the fun in that?”

She practically skips off laughing, but I’m forever a changed man.

Turning around, I start gathering up the supplies and bag them up. All the while, the only thing my brain can focus on is calculating and recalculating the timeline of Mia’s birth. After the fourth or fifth time, I’m forced to admit that my Prissy girl was pregnant when we split all those years ago. Mia is mine and for whatever reason she is lying to me. This morning I was all but ready to ask Priscilla to be my old lady and to make this thing we’ve been building permanent, but now I don’t know what to think.

She’s been lying to me.

I pull off my gloves and throw them in the bag before taking out my phone and calling Venom. He’s not only my club brother but we swore allegiance to each other and sealed it with a blood oath. My blood brother always answers in two rings or less for me.

“What’s up Rage? You still have the rugrats at your place? You’re gonna have to give me pointers for when mine and Amy’s kid arrives.”

“Yeah, the girls are all here. Look, I need to ask you something, do you think Mia is mine?”

There is a pregnant pause as Ven digests my comment. “There’s no denying she looks like you. Why do you think she’s yours, did Priscilla say something?”

“No, but everything fits. Look, can you meet up with me at the courthouse in a couple of hours? I want to go to county records and look up her birth certificate.”

“Yeah, but you gotta know that Zen can look that shit up on the computer.”

“No fucking way. Mia is my daughter. I want to be the one to track down every fucking detail. No one else, just me.”

“Have you asked her?” he asks.

“What? And get another bunch of bullshit lies,” I say.

“Why don’t you do a DNA test? That’ll tell you everything you need to know, I promise you.”

“I’m gonna do exactly that, but I need to see what’s written on the birth certificate.” I can hear the anger in my own voice.

I’m so far down the rabbit hole that I can’t remember exactly what Ven said, only that he’d meet me at the clubhouse. I lower the phone from my ear and stare at the now dark screen. There are a few hairs lying on the sleeve of my shirt. I pick them up and hold them to the light, Louisa and Amy have light hair, whereas this is darker. Shoving my phone into my pocket, I carefully lift the hair, wind it around one finger and slide it into my inner vest pocket.

I’d like to say that my prevailing emotion is excitement, but that emotion is lurking somewhere beneath stone-cold fury and absolute disgust with Priscilla. She lied to me all these years, raised my daughter with another man. My kid deserved better than being raised by the likes of an asshole like Conrad.

I was filled with an intense loathing and anger towards Conrad’s father, thinking he was behind the headless rabbits left on my doorstep, but now, I was in a mood to defy all of Siege and Rigs’ best laid plans for discovering who did his dirty work and forcing information out of him. I’m ready to go and pick the fucker up and beat some

information out of him.

I toss the bag I used to clean up our mess into the trash and stalk out of the mud room. Since I'm not fit company for little girls, I go outside and walk the perimeter of my property, looking for anything that might suggest trouble. I send Evan in to keep an eye on the girls. Of course, I find nothing on my walk. Ever since I put the cameras in, whoever was fucking with us has kept their distance.

As for Priscilla, if what I'm thinking is true, I'm disappointed and angry with her for not coming clean with me the minute she found out I was alive. I fucking saved her life, and she repaid me by keeping the most hurtful secret imaginable. All the feelings of betrayal and abandonment from years ago come flooding back in an instant. Priscilla has always been my one soft spot. No one can cut as deep as she can when she effortlessly violates my trust.

I can't be here, I can't be around her right now, not when I'm this angry. I need to calm the fuck down.

I march up to my bedroom, where she's still sleeping and quietly retrieve the Dear John letter I received all those years ago, the one she claims is fake now that she needs me once again. I slide it into my back pocket but when I turn to leave, Priscilla is sitting up in bed.

The look on her face is concerned. "Is everything okay. You were stomping when you came into the bedroom and it woke me."

Glancing away because I can't stand to look at her right now, I say, "I'm sorry, but you need to get up and watch the girls. I have club business to attend to this morning."

"Of course. I'm sorry I overslept. I didn't mean to dump them on you."

“Yeah, whatever, I’ll give you fifteen minutes to pull yourself together then I’m gonna have to leave.” Without another word, I turn and walk back out of the room. Truth be told, I’m stomping again and couldn’t care less. I’m going to sort this issue out one way or another today.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:14 am

Priscilla

I sit there in bed staring at Rage's back as he practically stalks out of the room. I don't know what I did for him to be so cold to me. I thought things were going really well between the two of us. So well, that I was thinking it might turn into something long term or maybe even end up with us living happily ever after in his spacious cottage.

Last night was absolutely unbelievable. Sex with Rage had always been phenomenal, but he blew my mind with one orgasm after another. He was insatiable and kept waking up ready for more. And God knows after years of no sex, I was more than up for it.

Now this morning, it's like he doesn't want to know me. I try to logic my way through this situation. Maybe sex with the one who got away was all he ever wanted, and I just imagined all the warmth and affection that led up to last night.

I had been fantasizing about telling him that Mia could be his daughter but now, I'm back to thinking that it wouldn't be a very good idea. Maybe he's decided that he doesn't want to be a family man and after a morning of looking after the girls he's gotten tired of it? My heart aches at the thought that he was just being nice to Mia to get me in bed or because he saw me as a charity case.

Coming to my feet, I let the sheet fall to the bed behind me and walk to the bathroom. I feel numb as I turn on the shower and walk through my morning routine. Rage gave me fifteen minutes, so I get to get my ass moving or the girls will be unsupervised. I dry off wondering if he sees sleeping in as dumping the kids on him. The way he told

me that I needed to get up and take care of the kids supports the idea that maybe I've allowed Mia to approach him too frequently and that we've been relying on him too much. I should have gotten up at the crack of dawn because I know the girls do. My heart sinks, even if Rage didn't turn out to be Mia's biological father, I thought we had a chance. But I was wrong.

When I get dressed and pad down to the kitchen, I see he made a big breakfast with bacon, eggs, biscuits, and most importantly coffee. I make myself a plate of food with what's left on the big platter in the center of the table and stack all the rest of the dishes in the sink to soak. Despite my depressed mood I find that I can eat. I'm eating the last of my breakfast when Mia comes into the room and exclaims, "Look at my hair, isn't it awesome! She spins around letting me see it from all sides.

"Your hair is gorgeous. Did you thank Rage for all the nice things he did for you this weekend?"

She preens a bit. "I sure did. He told me to start thinking about what I want to do for my birthday."

I freeze in place and my stomach drops. "Did he ask about your birthday, or did you volunteer that information?"

She frowns at me as though I'm harshing her vibe. "He asked me how old I am and said we could do something fun for my birthday. I'm not gonna ask him for expensive things just because he's rich."

"He's a paramedic, Mia. Most first responders aren't rich. They work hard for their money, so we shouldn't expect him to throw lavish parties for our birthdays."

"He asked about my real dad too, I told him he was dead, like you said."

I'm not paying a bit of attention to anything Mia says after that because suddenly I know all the way down to my bones why Rage was acting so distant and weird this morning. It's because he's done the math and realized that he could be Mia's father. When I married Conrad, I did what my parents told me and said that Raymond was Mia's father and that he was dead. That was the lie that we all lived under. I hadn't told Mia anything about her real father other than that he was dead. I didn't want to build up the fantasy of Raymond in her head, especially not when I knew it wasn't true. But I'm guessing that, combined with her age has gotten him thinking. My heart is racing, this is the last thing I wanted to happen. I'd decided last night that I'd tell him my worries—that I honestly had believed her father was Ashton, and I still wasn't sure. I was ready to have that talk with him, but I hadn't wanted him to find out this way.

“Sweetie, why don't you go tell your friends that it's time to pack up. Their families are going to be here soon to pick them up.”

She complains about the weekend getting cut short all the way to the door, but they all tromp back in and up the stairs a few minutes later. I quickly send a text for their moms to pick them up because an emergency just came up.

Then I sit at the table staring into my empty coffee cup as the reality of my situation hits me like a tsunami. Everything was going fine, he was trusting and loving me again until I blew it by not telling him about him possibly being Mia's father.

Shit, shit, shit. Standing up, I start pacing. Feeling like a queen of fools for ruining the best relationship of my life twice, I tear up. Rage hates liars and disloyal people. He always has and always will. I knew that about him and now, I've messed everything up.

Pacing back and forth, I rack my brain trying to figure out a way out of this situation for us. The urge to run is strong, but running away never solved anything. If I hadn't

run off after I'd been attacked by Ashton, then Rage and I might have been living our happily ever after for all these years.

My eyes go to the coffee table, and I see the cellphone that Rage brought over from my house. I hadn't bothered switching it on, partly because there was no one to call, and partly because I assumed it had no charge. Almost as a distraction, I switch it on and see it spring to life. There's a bunch of missed calls from my mother. We hadn't spoken for years, I probably should have gotten in touch after Conrad shot me, but with everything else going on in my life it didn't seem important. My parents hadn't cared much about me, practically selling me off to the highest bidder and living off a pay-off for their silence—so the fact I'd almost been killed by the man they had me marry wouldn't have been much of a concern.

However, despite my better judgment I call the number.

"Priscilla! Your father and I have been trying to contact you. Why haven't you been picking up?"

"I guess you heard about Conrad."

"His father has been calling us nonstop, telling us that you're the reason he wound up dead."

"Why did you tell me Ray had died," I say, ignoring her crazy accusations.

"What?" my mother's voice rises an octave.

"Ray, you told me he was dead, you showed me his grave. Why would you lie about something like that?"

"That's in the past, but you're coming with us now." My mother's voice was stern.

I'd heard that tone before, it was the tone she used when they told me I had no choice but to marry Conrad.

"You're on the East Coast. Besides, I'm staying with Raymond," I say. Though I wonder how long I'll be staying with him. I only hope that he'll forgive me when I tell him the truth.

"Your father and I are in Las Salinas. We had some urgent business to deal with. We need to talk, I know it's been years but we're still your parents."

My throat closes up, all I want to do is talk to Rage, to sort out this misunderstanding. To find out the truth, but maybe now is my chance to ask my parents why they married me off, why they cared so little that they'd send me to live with the family of my rapist. Why they happily lived on a monthly payout from my attacker's father.

"I don't have a car, I can't pick you up," I say. I could use Rage's pickup truck, but the way he was when he left this morning, I don't want to do anything to anger him further. He might accuse me of stealing it.

"Don't you worry about that. Share your location with me and we'll swing by and pick you up," my mother replies.

Knowing that I'm between a rock and hard place, I swallow my pride and tell her, "Yes, ma'am."

I've gone from fierce and strong back to being a doormat with alarming speed. It's what makes me realize that I was never strong. It was the false sense of security of having Rage at my side that made me feel that way.

Rage has a kind of inner strength that I will never have. He's brash, speaks his mind, and skillfully uses humor to drive his point home. He's an upstanding member of his

community and has not only managed to build a life for himself, he's been adopted into a wonderful family that's filled with love. Sure, Meli may be cunning and outspoken but deep down inside, she's good people. Then there's his club. He's a good brother who is highly valued by his club. That's why they pulled together to help him with all the problems I brought to his doorstep.

Even though he's kind and empathetic, he doesn't tolerate fools, liars, or manipulators. Neither Rage, nor the other people in his life are going to forgive me for not coming clean about Mia possibly being his child.

Frannie stops by to pick up both the girls, which isn't all that surprising, since Amy and Louisa are practically joined at the hip. I make nice and cut the small talk short. Mia is standing on the stairs staring at my exchange with Frannie. When I turn, she speaks in a quiet monotone, "Did I say something wrong to Rage? He left really quickly."

I walk over to the bottom of the stairs, and we walk up to the second floor together. I put my hands on her shoulders and turn her around so I can look her in the eyes. "No sweetheart, everything will be fine. But Grandma and Grandpa are coming, they want to talk to us about something."

"Grandma's dead" Mia says looking confused.

"Not Grandma Whitmore, I mean my parents."

"But we never see them," Mia hugs her toy cat tighter. It seems in this moment she's gone from a confident tween into a scared little girl.

"They want to talk to me about something," I tell her.

Actually I want to talk to them. In the weeks that I've been with Rage I've grown a backbone. I want to know what happened all those years ago, why they did this to me.

Mia looks at me with her big green eyes, Rage's green eyes, and I take her hand. "Mia, I need to talk to you about your father. Your real father."

"Daddy's dead."

I let out a sigh, this probably wasn't the time or the place. And ideally, I'd want to know for sure before saying anything, but Mia has clearly picked up on the fact that something is wrong, "I think Rage might be your daddy."

Her eyes go wide, "Really?"

I nod, "After we've been to see your grandparents, tonight Rage and I need to have a talk, all of us do."

"But he's my daddy?" she asks.

"I don't know for sure sweetheart, that's what we need to talk about," Mia is too young to understand everything that happened, and she's too young to be told about Ashton or how I ended up marrying Conrad.

"I'd like him to be my daddy, he'd be the best daddy in the world," she says as she squeezes her stuffed toy tightly.

He would.

This child of mine has always looked younger than her true age. And right now she seems more fragile and vulnerable than ever. I don't think I look any more put

together as I wait for my parents to arrive. From today, my life is never going to be the same as it was, I only hope that Rage will be there at my side throughout whatever's coming.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:14 am

Rage

My first stop is at a local lab that a friend of mine works at. I deliver the uncolored strand of Mia's hair along with one of my own to Maggie, an older woman I once met when her husband had a heart attack while waiting for her to finish grocery shopping. She came out to find me giving him CPR in the parking lot and we still speak when we run into each other. I fill out the form asking for a DNA match, slide the samples into a sterile container and pay the fee.

When she reaches out her gloved to hand to take the container, I hang onto it for a second as I quietly ask, "Can you put a rush on this job?"

The older woman looks at me intently. "I can try, we're swamped right now. I might be able to process it by the end of the week, if not by next week for sure. Is that fast enough?"

"Yes. That's perfect. Thank you for seeing to this personally. I owe you one."

Her expression morphs into one of gratitude. "You paid a lifetime of favors in advance. Ralph, told me to tell you hi when I see you again."

"Tell him I say hello back and that we should go out for lunch sometime."

"I'm sure he'd like that." Tugging the container gently from my hand, she tells me, "I'll call you the minute I get the results back."

As I head back to my bike I check the first item of the day off my list. Next, I want to

meet with Rigs. I send him a text and discover he's in his office at the clubhouse. I go straight there and stalk into his office without so much as a good morning to anyone.

He can tell by the look on my face that something's up. "Sit down, take a few deep breaths and tell me what's bothering you, brother."

I sit in the chair on the other side of his desk and just blurt it all out to him. "You already know I'm back with Priscilla."

"If you're here about the rabbit thing, we got a match on the fingerprints on the box, but the perp was picked up by the police on a drug charge before we could get to him. He's in county lockup. We plan to jump on him the minute he gets released."

Making an imperious slashing gesture with one hand, I say, "Good information to have, but I'm not here about that. I was taking care of Mia today and caught a glimpse of both of us in the mirror. It hit me pretty hard how much we look alike. We both have green eyes, the same complexion, and exactly the same type of hair."

Rigs begins to pull back. "What exactly are you saying?"

"I asked her how old she is, and she said she was ten. Going by her birthday, and assuming Priscilla had a nine-month pregnancy, that means she was pregnant when she took off. To my mind that means there's a good probability that Mia is my daughter."

Rigs' expression is cautious. "That's good news, right?"

"Yeah, I'd love it if Mia turns out to be my kid. What I don't appreciate is her mother running out on me pregnant, pretending she thought I was dead and marrying an asshole like Conrad. He had no business being within striking distance of my daughter. I cannot forgive her for not telling me right away when we first got back

together. I mean, why wouldn't she tell me?"

"Why do you think she didn't tell you, Rage?"

I shrug, still angry. "I don't know. She sent me a letter years ago saying that we were from different worlds, and she wanted someone who could provide the kind of life her parents did when she was growing up. Then she told me the letter was fabricated by her parents and given to me behind her back."

"So you don't believe her. Is that what I'm hearing you say?"

"When she came back into my world, she convinced me that everything I thought I knew about our breakup was wrong. She got me to trust her again. We've gotten really close over the last few weeks. I fell in love with her all over again and we've been sleeping together. And then she never fucking told me that Mia was my daughter."

"I know that hurts and she should have been honest with you, but we need to look at the reasons she might not have felt comfortable doing that—that's if Mia is yours and we still don't know if that's true."

"You're right. I know you are. But it feels like I'm good enough to save her life, take her in when she has nowhere to go, provide for her and protect her but somehow, I'm not good enough to be Mia's dad. That's really fucking unfair because I've gone the extra mile for this woman."

"I'm not trying to play devil's advocate here, but I don't think you should get yourself worked up until you get a court ordered paternity test."

"Fuck that, I dropped off hair samples from me and Mia at the lab in town just now. I know it won't hold up in court, but it'll be enough for me, I need to know this. I can

always get a court appointed one if and when I file for custody and make no mistake I will file on her.”

Rigs gives me a hard stare, “You sound really angry right now, like a guy who’s earned his club name a hundred times over. I’ll do everything in my power to help you get to the bottom of this but my best advice for you is to stay away from Priscilla and Mia until you calm down. Going in half-cocked won’t do anyone any favors.”

“Fuck being calm! Do you understand what this means? It means the only woman I ever loved is just using me. How do I know she didn’t make up a bunch of lies to excuse away our breakup because she needs me right now.”

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but this is your anger talking. She didn’t engineer the situation with her husband shooting her, she didn’t know that you’d be called in as the medic. We don’t know what she’s been through, if she’s been hiding things from you, then she might have a good reason,” the older brother’s voice is calm but deadly serious. I know somewhere deep inside that he’s talking sense, but right now I don’t give a damn, “But why—”

“First things first, brother. You’ve got the ball rolling on the paternity test which will answer your main question. What’s next?”

“Ven has agreed to go to the courthouse with me. I want to pull her marriage license and Mia’s birth certificate. I want to see with my own eyes what she wrote down on those dates. I have the breakup letter from years ago and I want to see if the handwriting matches up, if she wrote the letter or someone else did.”

Before Rigs can interject, I continue. “Then I want to visit Meli. She and Priscilla have been getting close and I want to know if she’s told her anything. I know what Meli is like, if she suspected anything she’d have come right out and asked. If Priscilla has lied to her, I’m not gonna be okay with that. Meli has been nothing but

nice to us. She doesn't deserve to be lied to because Priscilla is ashamed of who Mia's father is."

"Why would she be ashamed of you, Rage? You're a fine, upstanding member of our community and member of the Savage Legion MC."

I jump to my feet and start pacing. "Because I grew up being kicked from one placement to another because of my shitty, uncooperative behavior. Because I never went to college. Because I'm a member of an MC. Because I still fly off the handle sometimes when I'm super stressed. There is a pile of reasons why a woman wouldn't want me to be her baby daddy, but I don't care. If Mia is my child, God help anyone who stands in my way of getting my fair share of parent time with her. Even if she isn't mine, I was getting used to her being in my life. I could see myself as her father."

"Sit down," Rigs commands. I do as he says. "You've got it into your head that she's yours and that Priscilla is lying. You've just admitted that you'd still want to be a father figure to her even if she wasn't yours. This is exactly why you cannot go off like a damn wrecking ball ruining what you've built up with Priscilla over the past few weeks. Do you understand? Before any accusations are made, you need to back them up with facts. I'd go as far as to say you don't even present them as accusations. Have a talk like fucking adults."

Rigs rarely swears, but it does the job, and I find myself nodding in agreement.

"Do you have this letter on you?" he asks.

I whip it out of my back pocket and drop it on the desk in front of him "I spent years thinking this is why she left me and now, I don't know what to think."

I watch Rigs carefully unfold the letter. It's torn around the edges because I used to

take it out to remind myself that she left because I wasn't good enough. I didn't earn enough, wasn't on a trajectory to go to college or make millions of dollars. She didn't want the only kind of life a man like me could give her.

"So you think she came back to you for your money. Does she even know anything about your financial situation?"

I look at him. "No, why does that matter?"

"Clearly, she can't be a gold digger if, in her mind, there is no gold to dig. Also, she didn't come back into your life. You came into hers."

I reluctantly have to admit what he is saying makes sense. "She doesn't know about my little windfall. Well, she didn't until recently. She tried to pay me back for everything I've done for her and Mia since she got out of hospital. I told her she didn't need to do that, that I was okay for money."

"Then clearly she's not after your money."

My mind is working overtime to figure out why she came back to me if it wasn't for my money. An ugly little voice in the back of my mind tells me that it's for safety and security, because she literally has no place else to go.

I don't want to think bad thoughts about Priscilla. Truth be told, I recognize that dark little voice that's talking shit about her in the back of my mind. It's the same little voice of doubt that told me I wasn't good enough for her all those years ago, that told me I wasn't smart enough to go to college to become a doctor, so I went into the army and became a medic instead. It's the same little voice that's been sabotaging me my whole damn life.

Well, not this time. This time I'm gonna take the high road. I'm going to keep my

head screwed on straight and give her the benefit of the doubt until I have proof that she was intentionally trying to manipulate me. I'm not going to lose the best thing in my life over self-doubt and low self-esteem again.

"Alright," I tell Rigs. You're right about me jumping the gun. I'm not going to make any snap judgments until I know for sure what's going on."

"Thank God for small mercies. I thought we were going to have to hog tie you there for a minute to keep you from imploding your whole relationship over things you don't even know are true."

My head lifts and I stare at him for a long hard moment. "Are you saying that you don't think Mia is mine."

"I can see the similarity, and from what you've told me it sounds like you have good reason to believe she's yours. What I'm saying is that women don't necessarily think like men, and there's probably something going through her mind that explains why she's reluctant to talk to you about that. I say we cut her some slack until we can verify that Mia is your daughter and talk to her about why she didn't tell you."

Rigs is making good sense and although I'm still upset about the way things went down, I'm willing to hold off on judging her on this issue until we unravel this mystery. "Alright, what do you make of the letter?"

"A couple of things jump out at me." Putting the letter down on the table between us, he smooths it out with one hand. "It's all written in the first person. It's 'I this' and 'we that'. Except this sentence here in the middle," he points to the page. "Whoever wrote the note slipped up and wrote, 'Going off to college is a rite of passage in our world. She wants to have that experience'. Why would Priscilla refer to herself in the third person instead of 'I' like in the rest of the letter?"

Staring down at where he's pointing, I can clearly see what I've missed all the other times I've read the letter. My mouth falls open and I berate myself for not picking up on that at the time.

Rigs' finger drops down to the signature at the end. "She signed her full name. How many people do that when they're writing to their partner? It seems very strange that she would do that. She could have written just P, and you would have known it was her just by reading the contents of the letter."

Again, he's right. I've never written a note or letter to a friend and felt the need to sign my full name that way. I'm starting to feel like the world's biggest fool, and also the world's biggest asshole the way I stormed out of my house this morning. I'm gonna have to do some making up to Priscilla when I get back. "Yeah, now that you mention it. Those are two big red flags that it was written by someone other than my Prissy."

Rigs steeples his fingers in front of him and is silent for a moment. When he speaks again, I know why people come to him with their problems. This man is smart. "I remember thinking that day I saw the headstone with your name on it in the back of your truck that these people would stop at nothing to pull the two of you apart. They went to absurd lengths to convince Priscilla you were dead. It stands to reason that a carefully worded letter which was meant to play on all your anxieties wouldn't have been a bridge too far for them. In fact, it's the perfect counterbalance to the headstone they had carved to convince her you were forever beyond her reach."

He's not wrong about that, at all. I'm reluctantly forced to admit that it's looking more likely that she was telling the truth about the letter being fabricated by her parents.

Rigs reaches into his drawer and pulls out a file, "While we've been waiting for the cops to move forward with the headless rabbits threat, Siege asked me to review the

information we know so far about this case. I've got a copy of the statement Priscilla made to the cops. Let's compare the handwriting from the statement with this letter. It could be that there'll be enough differences to conclude the handwriting is not hers."

"That's a fantastic idea. I was thinking along those lines myself earlier today. It's one reason I took the letter with me this morning."

We spread the two documents out side-by-side and right away, I notice some significant differences. Priscilla makes the loops on the top of her Ls short and fat. In the letter that shattered all my hopes for the future the tops were tall and almost pointed. Rigs begins pointing out all the more subtle differences. By the time he's finished I feel like a fucking fool for ever doubting her version of events.

"I can tell you're feeling guilty for thinking the worst of her."

"I'm an asshole and a half, for even thinking someone like Priscilla would lie to my face about our breakup."

"What you need to understand is your doubts had nothing to do with Priscilla, and everything to do with your own insecurities. You, like many of us, carry a lot of trauma from being abandoned and shuffled around during your childhood. In doubting her honesty, you were really doubting that you were worthy of love and loyalty from the woman you love. Being abused as a child makes us feel unlovable so we look for evidence that we're not being loved and respected."

Before I can respond, Venom comes bounding into the room with a piece of paper in his hand. "I went ahead and stopped by the courthouse for you. I got a copy of everything that had Priscilla and Mia's name on it."

He slaps the documents down on the desk and drops down into the seat beside me. By this point, I don't even care that he did it without me. Jumping the gun is kind of his

thing.

We look over the documents and discover that Mia had written deceased in the space for father, but someone had marked a line through it and the same doctor who signed the bottom also initialed the correction by putting their initials. Priscilla also initialed the correction. “It feels like she was trying to acknowledge that I wasn’t available to sign because I was deceased, but they wouldn’t let her.”

Rigs who is also a justice of the peace, responds, “Of course they couldn’t allow her to just write deceased in that space. She would have had to either have a court order or a death certificate with proof that you were the father.”

Rubbing my chin, I think about what that time must have been like for Priscilla. “I feel sorry for her being put in that position. She probably felt terrible. I’m sure Conrad was a real ass about it too.”

Venom says, “That asshole got what he deserved in the end. The only thing I regret is that we can’t kill him twice.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, but I keep it to myself. “So the letter was legit. Her trying to acknowledge that I was deceased on the birth certificate seems like she really believed that it was true, and she was trying to do the right thing.”

“It’s shit like this that triggers postpartum depression in women,” Rigs grumbles. “Imagine having to deal with toxic assholes like Conrad and his family right after you give birth to your dead boyfriend’s child.”

Guilt over doubting her is now eating me up at this point but I press on. “So, the next order of business is verifying that Mia is actually my daughter. I’m pretty damn sure she is.”

Venom mumbles, “Anyone who’s seen the two of you together is pretty damn sure she’s yours.”

My head slowly turns to stare at him. What he’s saying is that I’m the last to realize what everyone already knows. That’s just fucking great.

“You already got the ball rolling on the paternity issue. You’re just gonna have to wait until the lab calls you with the results.”

I stubbornly want to do something, anything to get some closure on this situation with Priscilla and Mia. “What about tracking Conrad’s father. We verified that he’s cleared out of his mini mansion. Did Zen or Smoke get a lead on a new location for him? Does the fucker have a yacht, a summer place, or a country cabin? Anything at all?”

Siege’s voice drifts from behind us as he enters Rigs’ office. “Yeah. As a matter of fact, Zen tracked down a secondary location. It’s a ski lodge in the mountains. It’s the only other place he owns in this state.”

Dark glee fills every corner of my soul. “I say, we go head and pay him visit.”

Rigs jumps to his feet. “Great. Let’s get this asshole before something more depraved than the bunny box pops off.”

I ask, “Who do we want on our team and when do we want this to go down?”

Siege grabs a seat, and we get down to planning out how to overwhelm the security at the old man’s fucking ski lodge.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:14 am

Priscilla

It seems like Mia and I have been sitting on Rage's sofa for ages. I think she's still taking in what I told her about Rage possibly being her father. I worry that I told her too soon, that we need to do a paternity test first, but with all the other secrets in my life, I don't want to keep that possibility from my daughter, and I think she's old enough to understand.

I hear a horn blaring from outside and nearly jump out of my skin. In a panic, I gently grab Mia's arm, "Your grandparents are here. There's one more thing you need to know."

"They're here?" my daughter says as she hugs her toy cat, looking years younger.

"Yes. And they have never liked Rage. They're probably going to say bad things about him but it's because they don't know him like we do. Sometimes, older people can be a little stubborn and set in their ways. Let's just ignore them and try to change the subject if they say things we don't like, okay?"

"You're asking me not to stand up for him after everything he did for us?"

"I know, it sounds awful when you phrase it like that. Trust me, arguing with them will just make things worse right now. I just need to see what they wanted to talk to me about, and then we can come home."

Home... I hope after today this will remain my home. As soon as we get back, I want to talk to Rage and tell him everything. I just hope that he understands and forgives

me.

The horn blares again and I jump to my feet. My anxiety is through the roof. I'm only just now realizing how nervous my parents make me. I guess over the last few years of not seeing them, I've forgotten how demanding they can be. I grab my purse and tell Mia, "It's time to go. Your grandparents don't like to wait."

Mia comes to her feet with a determined expression on her face and her stuffed cat tucked firmly under one arm. "Alright, I'll try not to argue but I'm not making any promises."

My sweet child has no idea what she's getting herself into by arguing about Rage with my parents, my mother in particular. I'll just have to run interference as best I can. I'm not going to let anyone, even my own mother, disrespect my child. Pain lances through my chest when I shut the door and activate the security system using the fingerprint scanner. The moment my hand lets go of the doorknob, I feel like my bond with Rage has been metaphorically severed. I know we have to talk, but the way he was earlier, I'm worried that he won't understand. The disconnect feels profound and painful. It's my own fault of course but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

When we step out the front door, I see my mother waving from the passenger side window. She has a dozen or so gold bangles on her wrist and looks like she just stepped out of a fashion magazine, the years have been kind to her and from her wrinkle-free complexion it looks like she had some work done. I'm not looking good by comparison, in my dress pants and sweater twinset. My mother frowns when she sees Mia is wearing jeans, a pink t-shirt, and a light jacket. I was never allowed to wear pants as a child, I always had to wear skirts or dresses.

I plaster a smile on my face as we walk up. I feel like I'm ten and have disappointed them somehow.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:14 am

Rage

I run my hands through my hair, exasperated as fuck. We're watching Whitmore's ski lodge, and it seems just as empty as his mini mansion. This fucker must have money coming out his ears, because his cabin is huge and sits on a much larger piece of land than the surrounding cabins. It's clear that Malcolm fucking Whitmore is compensating for something because all his houses have to be bigger and better than the others in his neighborhood.

Rigs speaks up, "I see something."

All our binoculars go to our eyes at the same time.

Siege mutters, "Someone must be home because it looks like they have a visitor."

"I hope it's Conrad's creepy brother," I say. "I've been wanting to get my hands on him for a while now. Did Zen still not dig up any dirt on him?"

"Nope," Rigs says. "Seems like the asshole was off grid for ten years."

Rider lowers his binoculars and his head swivels around to look at me. "One fucker at a time, Rage. We'll be lucky to get the old man, much less the brother."

Siege speaks without lowering his binoculars. "I'll take a two for one deal any damn time. It keeps us from having to run them down individually."

Our club president ain't wrong about that, I think to myself. We watch a well-dressed

gentleman with a box that looks like it might contain a gift or desserts, get out of a fancy SUV and go into the cabin. It's not Whitmore or his son, but with any luck he knows something.

I get up from my stooping position and announce, "That's good enough for me. I say we get our asses in there and shake some fuckers up."

Rider jumps to his feet as well. "I'm all for getting this the fuck over with. It's not that I'm not looking forward to beating some information out of this sick fucker. It's just that I want to get home to Frannie because this is a child free day for us, and I don't like wasting it on ignorant assholes who like to harass innocent women."

"Yeah," I respond enthusiastically. "I agree with that statement one hundred percent."

"I say we give it a couple more hours and see who else shows up. Knowledge is power," Rigs says.

Siege walks over to Rigs. "I agree about studying these assholes. Only my thought is that it would be easier to study them up close from the inside and if we're diligent, we might find evidence of what they're up to in there as well."

Rigs frowns. "Yeah, I guess we could slip in and make it look like no one's there, since that seems to be the way they roll around here."

Siege slaps him on the back, and we huddle to make a plan to get inside. My club brothers end up covering me as I jump the small stone surrounding wall and race to the back porch. They follow suit without drawing attention to themselves. And when all six of us are at the back door, I pry open the digital lock and short it out. It makes the porch light go out as well. Good thing it's daylight outside because I think I may have thrown a break in the back part of the house. I jimmy the door open, and we all pour into what looks like a mud room.

This is the point we all spread out and begin searching the house. Finally we run into the man we saw enter the building. He's standing beside a woman with the box open between them. Turns out it was just donuts.

The man doesn't even panic. "Mr. Whitmore said we might get a visit from a bunch of thugs. Said you might be bikers actually."

The man eyes us with interest, as if trying to figure out if we are in fact bikers. Since we ditched our cuts, it's not obvious by looking at us.

"We're just regular folks, looking to figure out why your employer is harassing a friend of ours."

"Mr. Whitmore said you'd probably say something like that. He also said to tell you that he's filing charges against you for breaking into his other properties."

Siege responds roughly, "Have a fucking seat and don't speak unless spoken to."

The man and woman obediently walk over and sit down at the kitchen table. The man addresses us, "Whatever man. Knock yourself out. Rob the place. Whatever. My employer doesn't keep anything of value here anyway."

I walk over to him and casually slap the donut out of his hand. "You're no good at following directions and you're a mouthy fucker as well. Has it occurred to you that we might be here for information rather than valuables? If that's the case, you're making yourself an attractive target to beat information out of."

The man freezes in place for a second, clearly panicking on the inside. He clears his throat. "No beating necessary. I'll be happy to tell you whatever you want to know."

Rigs walks over to stand beside me as the other brothers scatter to see if Whitmore or

anyone else is in the cabin.

Rigs grumbles, "That was too easy."

I reply irritably, "It's because this fucker likely doesn't know anything about Whitmore, and his lady friend probably knows even less." Turning to the man, I ask, "Who the fuck are you, the caretaker?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "Yes, I am actually. My name is Harold Edwins. Been working here for coming up on five years."

Rigs asks, "Where's Whitmore right now?"

Harold exclaims, "Hell if I know! I've never laid eyes on my boss. Not once in all the five years I've worked here."

"So what? The two of you just hang out here and play house, or something?"

He gives a nervous laugh. "Conrad used to come here to ski and socialize with the other residents. Occasionally, his brother Ashton puts in an appearance for a week or two at a time."

"What's Ashton like?" I ask. I couldn't help but notice the look of revulsion that flashed on the woman's face when his name was mentioned.

"Like all the other wealthy folks around here. He likes his breakfast served hot at eight o'clock sharp and doesn't usually take visitors. He just hangs around and skis occasionally."

"Is he creepy?" Holding up one hand, I explain, "The only reason I ask is because I heard he was."

Harold takes a deep breath and chooses his words carefully. “It’s not my job to cast aspersions upon the character of my employers.”

Rigs glances at me and murmurs, “That’s a yes, if ever I’ve heard one.”

Siege rushes back in. “The rest of the house is clear. Zen is accessing their electronic devices and Ven reports the drones aren’t picking up any unusual activity outside.”

The woman blurts out, “Can I go now? I don’t have anything to do with whatever is going on between you and Mr. Whitmore.”

Rigs answers, “Of course you can’t leave while we’re here. Can’t have you running to the cops. Have a seat. We’re not the kind of men to hurt women.”

Harold quips, “That just the kind of thing a criminal would stay before they start doing evil shit.”

“I said we don’t hurt women. You’re not a woman, so unless you want a tune up, shut your mouth unless we ask you a question,” Rigs says menacingly. I gotta admit our club minister is not a man you’d want to mess with.

As we walk off to huddle, I can hear Harold grumble under his breath, “This is so fucking messed up, we only work for the man.”

The woman beside him shushes him, probably afraid that Rigs is going to beat the shit out of him.

When we’re on the other side of the room, Siege lowers his voice. “Zen is checking the electronic devices for intel, hopefully we’ll find something incriminating on the fucker.”

“I doubt he’s going to find anything.” I no sooner get the words out of my mouth than Zen is yelling for us. We herd Harold and the lady who never told us her name upstairs into the master bedroom. What I see on the screen makes me furious. Zen’s opened a folder of pictures and it’s just hundreds of images of Priscilla going back years, a reminder that Conrad was obsessed with the one and only woman I ever loved. She was mine all those years ago and he used deceit and her parents to steal her from me.

“I hate Conrad Whitmore with the fire of a thousand suns,” I say angrily.

Zen informs me grimly, “This isn’t Conrad’s. It’s Ashton’s. He left a flash drive in the computer.”

My mouth falls open. “What! Are you saying that Ashton was as obsessed with Priscilla as his brother?”

Harold snorts a laugh. My hand was on his throat before I even made the conscious decision to throttle him. “What the fuck is so funny, asshole?”

The woman speaks up. “Conrad was never obsessed with Priscilla. It was always Ashton. Conrad only married her to keep Ashton from having her, it was the only way to keep her safe.”

I drop Harold and he crumples to the floor gasping for breath. Every head in the room turns to look at the woman. Rigs asks, “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Emily Pemberton. I was hired to cook and clean, originally at the Whitmore estate in town. But I ended up getting transferred here after I discovered Ashton’s sick obsession with Priscilla. The reason his family got him institutionalized for so—”

Harold chokes out, “Shut up, Em.”

“I’m tired of watching people like the Whitmores get away with stuff. It’s high time someone spoke up.”

Turning back to me, she explains, “I’ve been with the family for almost fifteen years. From what I could tell, Ashton has been obsessed with Priscilla since they were really young, maybe twelve or thirteen. She must have had some kind of inkling that he wasn’t right because she never would give him the time of day. He used to complain about that a lot to his father. Mr. Whitmore didn’t care anything about Priscilla. He hated her because he had to listen to Ashton complain about her so much.”

“Then why the fuck did Malcolm work so hard to leverage her into marrying into his family?” I ask, infuriated with what I’m hearing.

“Ashton was a bad seed, even as a kid there was something wrong with him. Conrad was always the golden child, the youngest, the one who could do no wrong.” Pausing thoughtfully, she adds, “They tried to get him help, but after his wife passed away Malcolm just let him get away with things. There were accusations against his oldest son, but he’d pay for people’s silence.” She stops for a moment, and it looks like she’s wondering whether to go further with the story. I don’t know what it is, but the talk about buying silence is making my Spidey senses tingle.

“Go on,” I say.

“I don’t know for certain what happened, but just over ten years ago Ashton got sent to a psychiatric institution. It was all hushed up, some private place. I think he’d attacked someone, a woman. Unlike the other times, Malcolm’s money couldn’t make it go away. That was around the time that Conrad married Priscilla.”

“What are you saying?” I demand.

“I’m saying I think Ashton did something to Priscilla, that was why his father got him locked away and that was why he made Conrad marry her.”

“Why marry her though?” I ask.

“Because of the baby—”

Harold groans, “For the love of God, shut the hell up. You don’t know what you’re doing by double-crossing the Whitmores.”

She frowns at him. “I know the Whitmore family dynamics far better than you do, and they can’t be allowed to ruin people’s lives. Conrad wasn’t a nice man but he wasn’t cruel, when his brother was released last year, something changed.”

My mind is spiraling with all this information, and suddenly I have an awful thought. Mia. I was convinced she was mine, but what if she was Ashton’s and that was what Priscilla was trying to hide? Her parents getting a monthly payout from Whitmore—was that hush money? My poor Prissy, has she lived all these years with her attacker’s family? Did Conrad shoot her as some sick attempt to make sure his brother couldn’t have her?

I realize in this moment that it makes no difference to me who Mia’s father is, I want to be there for Priscilla and her daughter. I want to be the father that little girl deserves whether she is biologically mine or not.

I look at Emily, “So what happened when he was released?”

Harold issues one last warning, “Emily don’t.”

Siege backhands Harold, “Priscilla may be in danger. Someone’s been stalking her and leaving dead animals on her doorstep, a mother and baby rabbit. Both

decapitated.”

Emily’s hand flies to her mouth. “Oh dear God.” Turning to Harold who is nursing a bloody nose, she says, “This has gotten out of hand, we have to stop them.”

He looks resigned, “Yeah, maybe it has, Em.” Reaching out across the table he takes her hand in his. “From what we could tell, Ashton was a troubled kid. It’s one reason his own parents never bonded well with him.”

Emily sighs. “That’s an understatement. Tell them the rest, Harold.”

He curses under his breath. “They caught him doing unspeakable things to animals when he was a kid, that’s how psychopaths start. He got released last year, the hospital said he was rehabilitated, but you can’t rehabilitate someone like him. It wasn’t even a recognized clinic his father had him in, just some private place to shut his son away. The whole out of sight out of mind thing. I doubt he ever got any treatment. I never knew him before he went away, so I can’t say if he changed. But I can say he gave me the creeps, you know how with some people you never turn your back on them? That was Ashton. I certainly didn’t want Em to be alone with him.” Wiping his nose on his sleeve, he continues, “He started trying to hang around Conrad’s place. As well as Priscilla, he’d gotten obsessed with her daughter. Mia always wanted a pet, but Conrad was afraid it would be too much temptation for Ashton to resist. He likes hurting animals and would probably really get off on doing something awful to Conrad’s pet. Conrad tried to get Ashton readmitted, but because he was classed as mentally competent it was impossible. That’s when Conrad’s drinking got worse. I think that was his way of escaping the situation.”

Conrad was an asshole who tried to kill Priscilla. I couldn’t forgive him anything, but on hearing this I wonder if he was as much a victim of his brother too?

“Why was Conrad’s house, cars, and every damn thing else he owned in his father’s

name?”

Harold speaks up, “I didn’t know that. But I’m guessing it was a way for his father to control him, or maybe it was another payoff, you know? Like, here son, marry this woman and I’ll give you a comfortable life.”

Emily adds quietly, “Always having to be on guard against Ashton drove Conrad to the brink of insanity, it drove him to drink.”

Rigs asks, “Didn’t the parents ever try to get his brother help when he was younger?”

She responds, “From what I remember hearing from Conrad, they put Ashton in therapy several times, once when they found him abusing Conrad when he was a baby. They saw him on the baby monitor holding his hand over Conrad’s face until he passed out and put Ashton in a residential treatment program for three months. He was four at the time, as the years went on, he just got better at hiding what he did.”

Rigs looks from Emily to Harold, “Ashton is the one you’re afraid of, not the old man, right?”

Harold sniffs loudly. “Yeah, you have no idea what Ashton is capable of. We have a good reason to be concerned for your lives.”

Emily says in a hushed tone, “We think he had something to do with his mother’s death. Even his father fears him deep down inside.”

I voice my earlier thoughts, “Do you think that maybe Conrad never loved Priscilla. He was just protecting her in some warped way and cracked under the pressure from Ashton, which led to resentment and him killing her as some sick form of protection?”

Emily looks really worried. “Who knows? Maybe there isn’t a good guy and bad guy, just a bad guy and a worse guy.”

Siege tries to clarify, “So, you think that Ashton is still after Priscilla and that he’s the one who left the dead rabbits on her doorstep.”

“Yeah, I don’t see him giving up now that Conrad is dead, if anything he’ll see it as his chance. There’s no one left to stop him finally taking her.”

Emily glances at Harold in a way that makes me think she didn’t really put the last piece of the puzzle together until just now.

Siege asks, “So what’s the plan for the two of you? Do you think Ashton is going to find out you talked?”

Harold looks truly mortified. “We’ve gotta run. Put as much distance between us and the Whitmores as possible.”

Rigs glances at Siege before speaking. “Or hear me out, we could provide you with a safe space until we resolve this situation with Ashton and his father. If they manage to survive, which isn’t likely, they’re going to wind up in jail. Having your witness testimony would go a long way towards putting Ashton away for a very long time.”

I interject, “ If he survives, and he ain’t gonna, if I have anything to say about it.”

Emily responds by making a cross over her chest. “God forgive me, but I think it’s for the best if he doesn’t.”

They end up accepting our offer of protection, but Emily’s words really drive home exactly how much of a danger they think Ashton is in general and to Priscilla in particular.

I think about that all the way back to the clubhouse. The minute we get there, I pull out my cellphone and call Priscilla. I need to hear her voice to know that she's okay. I have to apologize for being an asshole, I shouldn't have stormed out this morning. I should have voiced my concerns about who Mia's father is. After everything I learned today, I really don't know. She looks so much like me, but it might just be wishful thinking. Either way I don't care. I just want both of them in my life.

Worry twists in my gut when she doesn't respond. Siege walks by with Harold and Emily. I tell him, "I can't get Priscilla to answer. I'm going to head home to make sure she's okay. We shouldn't have called the prospects back in."

"The person who left the box is in the holding cells, we didn't think she was in danger, so having four prospects guard your place was overkill. Don't let the things you learned about Ashton get inside your head. You have a good security system. I'm sure she's fine."

Rigs jerks his chin at Tex. "We'd best go with you, just to be on the safe side."

We head out immediately. Even though my gas tank is getting low, I don't stop. The bad feeling in my gut is just getting exponentially worse the closer I get to my place, and I can't shake it off.

Sure enough, Priscilla and Mia are missing from my house. We search high and low, without talking about how my security system was set and my door was locked. That can only mean that she left me again. And I'm kicking myself once more for how I acted.

Rigs walks up with a sheet of paper in his hands. "You should probably read this."

I drop down in a chair and scan over the handwritten letter Priscilla wrote to me. I feel all the old pain rising in my chest because this situation is so similar to the first time she left me. The only difference is that I can be reassured that she actually wrote the note, and she's not left me again. But what's in the note is equally puzzling.

She starts by apologizing for leaving a note. Saying I seemed so angry this morning that she was worried I'd not pick up if she called. She tells me that we need to have a talk, that there's some things that happened in the past she didn't tell me about. Then my breath catches.

She says that she thinks Mia might be mine, that she honestly didn't think she was, but Meli told her about my strawberry allergy which Mia has, and she found my dog tags with my blood group. She had thought Mia was someone else's, someone she had hoped never to see again. She says she didn't want to tell me until she was sure, but the way I acted this morning made her worried that I'd already guessed and thought she was lying.

I'm cursing myself for being such an asshole, if I'd spoken to her this morning then maybe now, she'd be safe.

What I read next, has me more than worried. She says she switched on the cellphone I brought back from her old house and there were lots of missed calls from her mother.

The mother she'd not spoken to in seven years.

She wrote that her parents were in Las Salinas and needed to talk to her and she'd be back later.

I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. Priscilla's parents haven't been in her life for years, me and my club brothers know about the scam they pulled off with Malcolm Whitmore, that they're supposedly dead. I have an awful thought that

Priscilla's parents and the Whitmores are mixed up in this together.

I realize that I haven't looked at my security feed, so I jump to my feet and go to the laptop I have set up to save the footage. When I search back in the digital footage, I see a vehicle show up and Priscilla and Mia come out to meet them. I can't see who's driving but they both get in and the car speeds off.

It hits me that I was rude to her this morning, and she probably thought I didn't want her anymore. I could kick my own ass for treating her that way. I truly am my own worst enemy.

Rigs' hand lands on my shoulder. "You're looking troubled brother, want to tell me what the letter says?"

I summarize the contents of the letter for him and tell him about seeing the vehicle come to pick up my girls, then finish with, "I hate that she thinks I might not want her, that I might not want Mia. You heard what Harold and Emily said earlier, I think Ashton attacked her and she spent all those years thinking Mia was his. That somehow her parents made her marry Conrad so they'd keep quiet about what Ashton did and get their payout."

"That's some wild accusations, but you may be onto something. Though wouldn't the Whitmores get a DNA test on Mia?"

I shrug, "I don't know. Maybe they did but thought it better to keep quiet. Maybe her parents were blackmailing them? Maybe Conrad found out that Mia wasn't his brother's and resented the fact he'd been forced into a marriage to protect his brother? It's all so fucking messed up. But the main thing I'm worried about is her parents resurfacing, that can't just be coincidence."

He frowns at me, "Can you make out the license plate?"

“No, the video footage isn’t clear enough.” I pull out my phone and try to call her again. It goes to voicemail. I leave a message asking her to call me back.

“Alright, then we head back to the clubhouse. At least we have a visual on the vehicle, we can see if Zen can get eyes on it approaching or leaving your property from the highway cameras. Siege was planning to pick Harold and Emily’s brains for information on where Ashton lives. Maybe we’ll kill two birds with one stone and find that’s where her parents are taking her.”

I hope to God they weren’t. I hope they’re taking her to a restaurant for a family catchup, but with what I knew of them already, I didn’t think that was likely. With more optimism than I felt, I say, “Hell yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.”

Priscilla

I honestly thought my parents were taking us to a fancy restaurant when they came to pick us up, but we end up in the biggest and most sparsely furnished house I've ever seen. This place is cold and soulless and yet somehow like a museum. I try to figure out which friend of theirs this house might belong to but keep coming up empty handed. I'm not sure what's happening, I want to call Rage to tell him I'm worried, but my father took my phone. I hope he sees the note I left him explaining things. It's the best I could do at damage limitation. This morning that was my biggest worry, but now I'm afraid of something worse.

"These are your rooms," my mother says as she shows us upstairs.

"Our rooms?"

"You didn't think your father and I were going to let you stay with that dirty biker. You're back home with us now, though we'll make sure you're well taken care of."

Something about this house freaks me out, so I insist upon Mia sharing a room with me. I think she's picking up on the strange vibe because she comes willingly and without a fuss. It's hard to see my outgoing daughter cowed by her surroundings. My mother shuts the door and leaves us alone. On the journey here I'd repeatedly asked her and my father why they'd told me Rage was dead, but all they would say was that they were protecting me.

I put my arm around my daughter, and we sit in silence.

Finally, she glances over her shoulder at me, “Do you think Rage will forget us?”

I pull her closer, “Rage is never going to forget us. He remembered me after eleven years and God knows he’d never forget his own daughter.”

She glances away, mumbling, “I was just checking, if he’s not my real daddy then he might not care.”

“He’d care, that’s the type of man he is,” I say.

She just hugs her toy cat tighter.

“You miss him already, don’t you? I know I do.”

She nods. “Grandma called him a dirtbag during the car ride here.” Gesturing with one hand she adds, “Wherever here is. Where are we? Is this their house?”

I reach out and draw her into my arms. “I don’t know sweetheart. I thought they lived on the other side of the country. I’m going to keep you safe whatever happens.”

The next thing I know, she’s crying softly on my chest. There is nothing in the world I hate more than my daughter suffering. I’d walk over hot coals to keep her from hurting. Unfortunately, there is very little I can do under the circumstances.

I don’t know how long we both lay on the bed before we heard a knock on the door. My mother opens the door and sticks her head into our room. I can tell she’s dressed up like she’s going to an elegant party. “Time to get ready for dinner. We dress for dinner here. You’ve got an hour, so let’s get to it, shall we?” Her singsong voice is a little grating, and I want to shout and scream at her to let me leave.

I just want to go home. Home... yes that's what Rage's house has become. I want to have that talk with him and hope that we can move forward. I want that more than anything, I wish I knew what my parents were up to, in the past I'd done everything they asked without question. But no longer. I wasn't their plaything, and I was going to demand that my father gives me back my cellphone. I'd call Rage and get him to pick us up. He was a good man, even if he couldn't forgive me, I knew him and his club brothers would help.

My mother is not to be trifled with, especially if we're staying with one of her friends so I suppose that means we have to sit at the table and play nicely.

I get off the bed and take a look in the closet, there's a sense of foreboding when I see the clothes there. There are a number of smart dresses, the kind of work dress women used to wear in the eighties. Beside are a few smaller dresses with puff sleeves clearly meant for Mia and absolutely not what she would choose to wear. The clothes are in our sizes and at this moment I realize that whoever wants us here planned it all along.

I fuss around with our hair and clothing and head downstairs with Mia in tow looking like a damn Stepford wife and her child. I come to a staggering stop in the doorway because sat at the dining room table with my parents are the Whitmores, Malcolm and his son, Ashton, who is looking all kinds of pleased with himself.

My heart is racing, coming face-to-face with my attacker. Conrad wouldn't allow him in the house, so I'd not seen him in over ten years. But instantly I was back in that alleyway.

"What's he doing here?" I demand. My voice worlds more confident than I feel.

My mother clears her throat, and I realize she thinks I'm being rude. I take Mia's hand and lead her to the table, murmuring, "Mr. Whitmore, it's nice to see you again."

“I truly wish I could say the same, Priscilla. Unfortunately, you are forever a pain in my side.”

“Father, you promised,” Ashton says with a note of warning in his voice.

His father freezes in place as the servers move around the table dishing out our food. I gesture at Mia to spread her napkin on her lap. She does so without hesitation. We wait for Malcolm to start eating and then join in eating our own food.

My mother starts talking about the Caribbean. At some point in the conversation, I realize my parents are living there instead of on the East Coast. I have no idea when that change happened. I remain silent because I have a feeling that my mother truly does not comprehend how abusive these people have been to me over the years. It’s hard to get her to understand because she discounts everything I say. I don’t know what’s going on, but I have a bad feeling. My eyes glance to the door, but what could I do if I ran? I don’t know where I am, and with Ashton here, running would do no good—if anything he’d enjoy it. I had to trust that with my parents and his father here, that nothing bad would happen to me.

Mia doesn’t quite know what to make of the situation. She just keeps her head down, alternating between eating and taking sips of her water. She has the right idea, I follow suit refusing the wine. I want to be clear headed.

Finally, my father speaks up. “Enough small talk.”

Malcolm mutters under his breath, “Thank God for small favors.”

My mother closes her mouth but the expression on her face speaks volumes about how much she doesn’t like being shushed.

My father leans forward so he sees me when he speaks, “Priscilla, now that Conrad is

no longer able to provide for you, your mother and I have been forced to make alternative arrangements for you and Mia.”

I respond smoothly, “I can get a job and support us. Women do it all the time, I’ve got somewhere to stay and now I’ve recovered I can look for work.”

My father clears his throat, “You won’t be working because you don’t have any work-related skills or experience that might position you to support yourself and your daughter, and you don’t have anywhere to stay because you are not going back to that biker.”

“I believe that’s for me to decide, not you.”

“Priscilla don’t talk to your father that way. We only want what’s best for you.”

“Like telling me the father of my child is dead?”

There’s a hiss from Ashton at that, and I see my parents and Malcolm Whitmore exchange a glance. At that moment I know I’m right. Rage really is Mia’s father and somehow my parents knew she wasn’t my attacker’s.

I glare at my mother, “What exactly did you have in mind, why did you bring me here? What’s going on? I want to go back home.” I truly can’t fathom what they’re all up to, but I can tell they’ve cooked up some plan. Whatever it is, I’m sure that I’m not going to like it. The thought pops into my head that they’re going to have me work as a live-in domestic worker or something like that. What my father says next floors me.

“We’ve made arrangements with Malcolm for you marry Ashton.”

I snatch up my napkin and throw it down on my half-eaten plate, eyes wide with

horror and indignation, “Absolutely not! You can’t keep marrying me off to whoever you see fit. Arranged marriages are not a thing in the US.”

My mother perks up. “It’s our duty to help you find a good husband who can take care of you and little Mia.”

I glance down the table to see Mia is just sitting there, no longer eating. Her head is down, and her eyes look almost closed, like she’s just waiting for this horrible conversation to be over.

I glare at Ashton who has been silent through all this, there’s a strange expression on his face that chills me to the bone. “I’m not marrying him.”

My mother says, “Priscilla, you’re being rude.”

I look my mother in the eye and tell it to her straight. “You can’t make me do this, this is the twenty-first century, and we are living in the US. You want me to marry my—” I abruptly stop, realizing Mia is listening to my every word. She doesn’t know what happened, doesn’t know that for years I thought she was a product of that attack. I’d kept her safe from that knowledge, I’d told myself that my daughter was all me and none of him. Turns out she was none of him anyway. I decide to speak in terms these rich assholes understand, “My husband died very recently. The time of mourning is supposed to be a year. I can’t possibly get married while I’m still officially in mourning.”

My mother’s mouth opens and closes, as if her mind is grasping for an appropriate way to reject that idea but nothing is coming easily to mind.

My father isn’t so easily dissuaded from this idea. “Now Priscilla, we understand that this is a bit abrupt. But you have to know that you can’t continue staying with an outlaw biker. That’s no place to raise an impressionable young child.”

Mia is suddenly all ears and mouth. “He’s my daddy. My daddy isn’t an outlaw biker. He’s a motorcycle enthusiast, that’s all.”

Malcolm slams his fist down on the table. “He’s a criminal. I should know because he broke into several properties I own.” Glaring at Mia, he says, “Children are to be seen and not heard. From now on you will refrain from interfering when the adults speak.”

“My daughter has a right to speak and you have no right to speak to her like that. If you have a problem with Mia, you bring it to me directly from now on, she’s nothing to do with your family.”

A look of white-hot rage jumps onto his face. Before he can go off on us, Ashton intercedes. “I don’t know why you’re fighting this so hard, Priscilla. You can do much worse than me for a husband. You should be grateful that I’m willing to take you and your daughter in after the way you’ve treated me over the years.”

“The way I’ve treated you?” I say incredulously.

“Yes, I could have given you so much. You have always been mine, you and Mia.”

I look at my parents and to Malcolm to see what their response is. My mother is busy eating like she hasn’t a care in the world while my father looks annoyed. Malcolm just looks like he always did, totally disinterested. No one at the table seems to realize what an absolutely insane thing they are suggesting. “Why would you even want to take on the responsibility of a wife and child? You’ve always been a bit of a lone wolf.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth a look crosses Ashton’s face and is gone so fast, I think at first that I imagined it, but it’s one that almost makes my heart freeze over. If I ever wondered what pure evil looks like then I have my answer, I’m sitting across the dinner table from it. I have to get out of here, I have to get me and Mia safe

from these people.

Ashton's face is blank as he says, "My brother ended up with something he didn't deserve when he married you. You were supposed to be mine."

"I don't want this."

Ashton leans forward." You will do as you're told. Becoming my wife will be the best thing that ever happened to you. Wait and see."

The finality in his tone scares me. Looking from one angry face to another around the dinner table drives home the fact that I'm not easily getting out of this one. These people are not going to stop until I have Ashton's ring on my finger. Something about that chills me to the bone.

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Rage

I 'm huddled up in our club meeting room with a couple dozen of my club brothers. We're brainstorming possible hotels that rich people would select in our small hometown, and we send a few brothers to scope out two. They have images of her parents' vehicle, and our hope is that they find it in one of the parking lots.

Ven is set up in the middle of town, hoping to catch images on his drone. So far, he's got nothing.

My phone jingles and I assume one of my club brothers found something. I pull it out to find that I've gotten a text from Mia.

My knees start to buckle underneath me when I read it.

Mia: I need you, Mommy needs you. I don't feel safe here. They took Mommy's cellphone but didn't know I had one.

"Hold up everyone. I'm getting text from Mia. She's in danger," I shout.

The room goes utterly silent as I quickly type a message out.

Me: Where are you, sweetheart? Tell me and I'll come get you.

Mia: I'm scared. Mommy said you're my real daddy, is this right?

Me: Yep, I'm your daddy. Tell me where you are so I can come and get you.

Mia: I'm at a big scary house. I don't know where.

Me: That's fine. Turn your location on and share it with me. You know how to do that?

I wait for a minute and then her location shows up.

Me: Alright, sweetheart. It looks like you're on the outskirts of Las Salinas. Does that sound about right?

Mia: Yes, we left town in a black car.

Me: "I'm on my way, right now. Tell me what's scaring you there.

Mia: Conrad's brother is scary. His dad is really angry and everyone's saying my mom has to marry Uncle Ashton.

I let out a long string of curse words under my breath.

Me: I'll put a stop to that the minute I get there. Did they give you a room?

Mia: Yes. Me and mom are sharing a room. I asked to be excused from the table to go to the bathroom.

Me: I want you and your mom to go to your room. Go into the ensuite bathroom and don't come out until you hear my voice. Lock the door, okay?"

Mia: You're really coming for us?

Me: Of course.

Mia: Hurry Daddy, they're shouting at each other now.

Me: You and your mom need to go to that safe space we talked about. Tell her you're sick or something.

Mia: Okay.

When the bubble closes, I hold the phone to my chest for a brief moment. My emotions are a jumble. My daughter reached out to me and called me Daddy for the first time when she was in danger and scared out of her mind. That was bittersweet. When I said I was her father I meant it with every fiber of my being. Being a father doesn't mean sharing blood, and whatever the DNA shows, that girl is mine if her mom will forgive me for being an asshole.

I flip to the location app and share it with my club brothers in our group chat.

"Talk to us," Siege says. "What just happened?"

"Priscilla's parent took her straight to Malcolm and Ashton. They're trying to leverage her into getting hitched to Ashton. Mia said they're all screaming at each other, and she's scared. She wants me to come and get her right away."

Siege makes a circle over his right shoulder by pointing one finger in the air and says, "Gear up. We're burning rubber in ten minutes."

This is the fastest we've ever geared up since I've been involved with the club. We're on the highway within half that time. It takes us a while to get to the house and it's another huge one. It must be nice to afford huge houses for one or two people when there are families struggling to find housing. The Whitmores get on my nerves with

their pretentious spending and always having to have the biggest everything. Rich assholes thinking they are above the law using people to get further in life. I hate scum like that.

So far, all their houses have been either empty or with the bare minimum of staff. Therefore, we surround his place and just crash right in without warning. There are two dozen of us and just a few staff. It makes me wonder what the old man was thinking in not keeping security in place. Though rich assholes always think they're untouchable.

While my club brothers deal with whatever's happening downstairs, I make my way to the second floor to look for my girls. I don't have to look very hard because I can hear a deep masculine voice in a yelling match with Priscilla.

"Get out of the damn bathroom before I rip the door off the fucking hinges, you're mine to control you fucking cunt and the sooner you accept it the better," the man roars.

"I'm not marrying you, Ashton, I'd rather be dead than have you touch me again."

"You damn well are and I'm going to make you pay for jerking me around and beat some obedience into my daughter."

"No you're not, and she's not your fucking daughter!" I yell, as I take off running and ram into him with one shoulder. It's a good old fashion football tackle and it sends him sprawling on his ass.

He rolls to his feet and charges at me. "Get the hell out of our house."

I shove him hard, and he crashes into the wall.

He lets out a long string of curses as I run past him to knock on the bathroom door. “Mia, you and your mom can come out now.” When they don’t immediately unlock the door, I glance at Ashton and raise my voice an octave. “Mia sweetheart, I told you I’d come, it’s Daddy.”

The door flies open, and Mia tries to come charging out, but her mom catches her just before she screams, “Behind you, Rage.”

I step sideways to miss whatever the asshole had in store for me, only to discover it’s a knife. No, it’s a large letter opener. I step out and disarm him with very little effort, tossing the long skinny piece of metal shaped like dagger away.

Ashton immediately reaches inside his pretentious dinner jacket and pulls out a gun. Unfortunately for him, I realize way before he even opens his fucking jacket that he’s going for a weapon and get mine out first. “Do not make me kill you in front of my daughter, asshole.”

He looks like he’s going to continue pulling on that gun, so I step into his personal space and hit him in the face with the butt of my pistol. “Hands off the gun, pretty boy.”

I only say that because Ashton clearly got all the looks in his family right along with most of the crazy. The moment his hand goes to cover his bleeding nose, I fish the gun out of his inner pocket and step back. If Priscilla and Mia weren’t standing there I’d have no second thoughts about shooting the bastard. But they’ve both been through enough. I’ll deal with the asshole later, that’s if my club brothers don’t get their hands on him first.

“I’m gonna give you a five-minute head start and then I’m going to hunt you down and beat your ass for thinking you could steal my woman and daughter away.”

“I didn’t. They came to me.”

Mia shouts, “Liar,” and Priscilla makes an indignant noise.

“You got four minutes and thirty seconds and you’re not making good use of it.”

“I’m not turning tail and running away from my own fucking house.”

“Fine by me, I can do this all day. I’ll just wait for my club brothers to be done with the assholes downstairs, then once my girls are away, you and me will have a little talk.” I say as I stuff his gun in the back of my pants and keep mine trained on him.

“They’re not your girls, they’re mine,” he says.

“Oh, I know enough about you to realize you don’t need to be around women and children.” I pause before adding, “Or animals.” The way I stress the word clues him in that I know about his past.

He points one bloody finger at me dramatically and says, “Shut the fuck up before something bad happens to you.”

“Give it up. I’ve already broken your nose and disarmed you twice. You don’t have an ego left to bruise.”

Suddenly, his mask slips and I see for the first time exactly what I’m dealing with. “I train people, not just animals. Some learn to adapt, and others fall by the wayside. Brute strength is no match for an analytical mind.”

I bring one finger up and make the gesture for crazy at the side of my head. “I’m sure that dumbass shit sounded better in your head than it did coming out of your mouth.”

“Seeing is believing.”

“Give up already. All I’ve seen so far is you bullying women and children and making an ass out of yourself. Surely to God you aren’t stupid enough to think that you’re running the show right now?”

“No, I’m just wasting enough time for my partner to show up.”

Ashton is a lone wolf. He doesn’t have a partner. That’s why I’m confused when I suddenly realize there’s a second set of footsteps coming up the side steps and it doesn’t sound like the heavy shit kickers my brothers wear.

Lo and behold, Harold comes skidding into the room. I don’t know how this clown got past my club brothers downstairs, but I do know that neither of these pricks are getting past me to my girls. How did we miss his involvement? The fucker told us to come here, did he think he was leading us to an ambush? I step out to close off their line of sight into the bathroom, pull out Ashton’s gun from my pants and aim one gun at each of them, “Who’s first?”

Ashton stares at Harold for a second before pointing at me. “Shoot that asshole. He’s on my last nerve and standing between me and my new bride.”

Harold opens his jacket with both hands, presumably to show he doesn’t have a weapon. “Like those members of the Savage Legion downstairs are just going to let me wander around with a loaded weapon.”

“Fine, we can both take him, if we work together,” Ashton says decisively.

“You’ve got the wrong idea about why I’m here, Ashton.”

“Don’t call me by my first name. You know I hate that.”

Rolling his eyes, Harold corrects himself, “Sorry, Mr. Whitmore. I actually came here because Emily is right. This shit between you and Conrad was fucked up but what’s even more fucked is you being allowed out of hospital.”

Ashton sneered, “Fuck off, Harold. I don’t take advice from the hired help. I’ve been declared mentally competent so no one can get me back in there.”

I jerk my chin at Harold. “Go downstairs and tell my club brothers that they need to come and get Ashton before I beat the living shit out of him.”

Harold turns to go. It’s a good thing I never fully took my eyes off Ashton because he charges at me knocking me off balance and sending my weapon skittering along the corridor. I thought he was coming for me, but he makes a beeline for the bathroom.

The moment his head turns to look at them all my protective instincts come rumbling to the surface. Something about the smirk on his face sets me off because he’s still trying to intimidate Priscilla and Mia. It works too because they both move back slightly.

I’ll be damned if I was gonna let him fuck with them right in front of me. Pissed, I spin around sweeping his feet out from under him and am on him in a matter of seconds, beating him over the head with the barrel of his own fucking gun. I want to shoot that fucker so badly, but I’ve gotta hold in my anger so I don’t scare my daughter. I hear the bathroom door slam shut and knowing they can’t see, makes me never want to stop punching this fucker. I earned my name in this moment by unloading all my anger and frustration on him. I don’t know how long I whale on the stupid fucker but at some point, Siege and Rigs are there pulling me off him.

Ashton was truly batshit crazy because he just laughs and gives me a big bloody smile. That just makes me want to kick his crazy ass all over again.

When I try to go after Ashton, my club brothers grab me and shove me in Venom's direction. Siege points towards the door Venom has just walked through. "Take your damned brother outside for a breath of fresh air. He needs to walk this off. He's no good for anyone when he's like this."

I shove my best friend aside. "Fuck that. I need to check on Priscilla and Mia."

As he's putting cable ties around Ashton's wrists, Siege growls, "You're a bloody fucking mess."

I ignore him and shoulder bump the locked door open. They're both huddled on the far side of the spacious bathroom. Priscilla is telling Mia that everything would be okay.

The minute they see me, both of them reach for me. I hurry across the room and kneel down in front of them. Relief surges through my body when they both move forward and fling themselves into my arms. I hate how scared they are.

Mia stammers, "You came for us."

Before I can answer, Priscilla speaks soothingly, "Of course he came for you sweetie. He's your dad and that's what dad's do."

When her eyes lift to mine, I can see she regretted not telling me about Mia and her worries. After both my girls almost getting harmed on my watch, all my angst about being left in the dark melts away. I lean forward and pull them in for a hug.

"I'm always going to protect my old lady and my daughter. The two of you have become my whole fucking world."

Mia lets out a laugh. "You owe the swear jar a buck."

“C’mon kid, you won’t let your old dad off with that, given the circumstances?”

She giggles and my heart sings. Whatever they’ve been through today, my little girl seems to be okay. I don’t know about her mother though.

Priscilla glances towards the door, where they’re still trying to get Ashton under control. “I don’t think Ashton is going to give up easily.”

I tell her in no uncertain terms. “I guarantee you that he’ll give up whatever crazy thoughts he has about forcing you to marry him. The Savage Legion has ways of coercing cooperation, you won’t see him again.”

Her expression morphs into one of not quite believing.

I add, “Trust me, we’re fucking crazy whisperers.”

I wait until my club brothers haul Ashton downstairs and then coax Priscilla and Mia out as well. They’ve already taken Ashton and Malcolm away, but Priscilla’s parents are still in the living room.

The minute her mother sets eyes on us, she gets up and starts moving towards us. “Priscilla, I thought I told you to stay away from these bikers. They’re nothing but trash.”

She doesn’t make it more than three steps before Tex grabs her by the back of the neck and forces her face down over an armchair. I watch with satisfaction as he slaps cuffs onto both her wrists and begins reciting her Miranda rights to her. Although he’s no longer a Texas Ranger, he’s believable enough for the awful woman to start paying attention. That couple are unbelievable, they pretty much sold their daughter to the Whitmores ten years ago, and they were willing to come out of hiding to do it again. What was Malcolm offering this time? Some sort of fucking retirement plan?

I glance at Priscilla, “What do you want to do here, Prissy girl?”

The woman I’ve already decided is mine lets go of Mia and walks confidently into the living room to face her parents.

Her mother struggles uncomfortably in the cuffs while glancing back and forth between Priscilla and Tex. “Priscilla, can you tell the officer to let me go. I haven’t done anything to merit being treated this way.” Her husband is suspiciously quiet, just watching and listening.

I come up behind Priscilla and share the shenanigans that went on behind her back. “Your parents colluded with Malcolm Whitmore to commit insurance fraud by faking their own deaths. Malcolm was listed as the primary beneficiary, and they split the money. If you want, we can turn the evidence over to the cops.”

“That’s not true,” her mother protests indignantly.

“It is. The payout was 4.3 million dollars. Your parents have been living like the millionaires they are in the Caribbean, not on the East Coast like they claimed.”

Priscilla mulls it over for a few seconds.

Before she can come to a conclusion, I turn her around and I look deeply into her eyes. “These people ruined your life, I know about Ashton, about what he did to you. Any normal parents would have gone to the cops but yours took a payoff and married you off to your abuser’s brother.” I stopped and glanced at Mia and back to Priscilla, “I know about Mia and what you thought—I don’t know the whole story but we can talk later—and I understand why you didn’t tell me when we reconnected, because you honestly didn’t know. But these two people almost ruined both our lives. If they hadn’t told you I was dead, then I know you’d have asked for my help.”

Her eyes drift from me to Mia and she turns back to her mother so fast, she almost loses her balance. Her expression is hard. “I think you should turn the information over to the police so they can do their job.”

Her mother gasps, “You wouldn’t dare!”

Priscilla folds her arms across her chest. “You took advantage of me when I was young and vulnerable, made me cover up a crime, lied to me, and manipulated me into marrying a man who almost killed me. We don’t speak for seven years, and what’s the reason for you getting in touch? To marry me off to my abuser. How much did they promise you this time?”

Her mother’s expression turns panicked as she realizes her attempts at emotional manipulation are falling flat. “We did it for you, Priscilla, because we loved you and wanted what was best for you.”

“No. You did it for money. I’m not a naive little eighteen-year-old anymore and I’m not going to forgive and forget all those years of misery.”

“We’re your parents. Are you going to turn against us because you fell in with outlaws?”

“The Savage Legion isn’t an outlaw biker club, mom. I’ve told you that before.”

The older woman keeps trying to slip her wrists out of the handcuffs as she talks. “Your judgment is impaired because of everything you’ve been through. Let us help you, sweetie. Ashton is a changed man.”

I speak up. “Seriously? I’ll not say what he is and what I think of him because my daughter is listening. But do you seriously want your daughter with a man like that, even if he’s a changed man. Which, for your information, he is not. Aside from what

he left on my doorstep, we found some pretty nasty stuff on his flash drive. He likes to hurt animals and stalk women. I don't think he's anyone you would want around your daughter or your granddaughter."

Mia speaks up from behind us. "My dad is right. Uncle Ashton is creepy and weird. Conrad wouldn't let him in the house. I don't want him anywhere near us."

Her mother turns to look at Mia as she takes a step closer. "Children should be seen and not heard. Close your mouth, child. This doesn't concern you."

Before anyone can respond, Priscilla makes her decision. "I think it's high time my parents answer for their crimes. Maybe then they won't ride around judging people by appearances and calling them criminals when they're in a cell."

I jerk my chin to Tex. "Get with Siege about taking them to the Las Salinas PD. You'll need whatever evidence they uncovered to make any charges stick."

"You got it, brother."

As we walk away, I see him cuffing her father who has blessedly remained silent the whole time. Venom follows us outside.

"Want me to transport Mia on my motorcycle?" he asks solemnly.

I glance at Mia. She's got her sparkle back pretty damn fast. She brings up her hands in a prayer pose and says, "Please, I want to go home right now, and I like bikes."

Priscilla shakes her head. "You're a bit young and inexperienced to be on the highway on the back of a motorcycle." Glancing at me, she says, "Hold on, I'll be right back."

I glance over my shoulder to see her race back into the house. She comes out moments later and tosses a set of keys in the air. “We’ll take my parents’ car. They’re not going to be needing it where they’re going.”

I offer, “If you want to warm the engine up, I’ll go upstairs and grab your personal effects.”

“There’s just my purse and Mia’s toy cat. Oh and my dad has my cell phone.” She wraps her arm around Mia and leads her to the car, giving me a grateful smile as she passes. Priscilla’s smile warms me from the inside out.

Once I’ve grabbed their stuff, Venom and I escort them, with me in front and him behind her vehicle. I glance down at my hands on the handlebars and realized my knuckles are still bloody from beating the shit out of Priscilla’s abuser. I spent the whole ride back home thinking up ingenious ways to force Ashton to leave Priscilla alone. Guy might not know it, but his days are numbered.

Priscilla

Meli meets us at home. I realize I'm beginning to think of it as that, and not Rage's home. I only hope that after we've had our talk then it will still be my home. From what he said in front of my mother I think he has an idea what happened and realizes that I wasn't lying to him. Meli not only brought food but offered to take Mia for the night. I guess Venom had filled her in on what happened, and she knew that we needed to have a talk in private.

I almost dread being alone with Rage because that means we'll have to have the conversation I've been avoiding, the one where I explain why I ran off the first time and what happened with Ashton. How I thought Ashton was Mia's father but now I'm pretty sure that Rage is.

Rage locks up the house, dims the lights and brings us out some wine. It was a sweet gesture, considering he prefers whiskey or beer. We sit on the sofa together and an awkward silence spins out between us.

Finally, Rage asks, "How are you holding up? I know today must have been difficult. First, we got off on the wrong foot—I was an asshole and I'm so sorry. Then you ended up having to deal with your parents and Ashton. I will never forgive that bastard for scaring Mia. It must have felt like the shittiest day of your life."

I take a sip of my wine and choose my words carefully. "I have a lot of awful days to compare today to and to be honest, this wasn't my worst day by far."

"If you want to talk, I'd like to be the one you confide all your secrets to, Prissy girl."

“You would think that my worst day ever was getting shot by my husband but that pales in comparison to the day my parents told me you died. They said you died in a violent head-on collision with a big rig. The thought of you suffering and dying was the most pain I’ve ever felt in my life. I remember screaming at them that it wasn’t true. There was no mention of it in the papers or on the news, so to my mind it didn’t happen.”

“How long before they popped up with that headstone?” he asks curiously.

“It was when I came home for winter break. I’d just found out I was pregnant,” I pause. I’m jumping ahead with the story. “My second worst day was a week before I left for college. I’d been at a friend’s house—Jennifer if you remember her? Anyway, I was coming home and suddenly I got dragged into a dark alleyway. I tried to fight but I couldn’t and when I saw his face I realized it was Ashton. I kind of knew his younger brother Conrad, as we shared a couple of classes, but Ashton always scared me. I didn’t know what to do, I told my parents what happened, saying I needed to go to the police. They told me that no one would believe me and that they’d sort it all out. I was so ashamed, I didn’t know how to tell you and I’m so sorry, Rage, but that’s why I left for college without saying goodbye. I knew you’d be distraught, but I’d seen what Ashton was capable of and I didn’t want you to get into any more trouble.”

Rage is looking at me intently. He reaches out and takes my hand, the feeling of his warm fingers stroking mine grounds me, and I continue, “I blocked your number. I hate that I did it, it was cowardly, but I couldn’t bear hearing your voice and having to explain. I tried to put everything behind me but then I started getting sick and I realized I was pregnant. I phoned my parents and told them, I said it was Ashton’s because we’d always used condoms. I told them about you, about how I was in love with you and that I wanted to come home and talk, to see if you’d forgive me. They said I shouldn’t waste my life on someone like you. I came home and—” my voice catches and I can feel the hot tears run down my face.

“You don’t have to continue,” Rage says softly. “I have an idea what happened next.”

I wipe my eyes, “Even though my parents thought Ashton was Mia’s father they told me to tell everyone it was you. That was the official story. Conrad took in this poor pregnant woman and raised her kid. He wasn’t abusive to me, though I think he resented the fact that he’d been forced into the marriage just as much as I had. When Ashton was in hospital things weren’t too bad, we weren’t exactly a happy family and he never acted as a father to Mia, but when Ashton was released last year, he changed. I think he realized that he had to keep his brother away from us. I thought that Conrad didn’t know the whole truth, at least about Mia, but I don’t know. I honestly don’t know what he thought. I only know that Ashton thought we were his.”

“So when did you start thinking she might be mine?” Rage asks. I realize that he’s trying to move away from Ashton as a way to make this easier for me.

“When Meli first saw Mia, she asked me—remember when she rushed to the bathroom on that first visit? She confronted me, I denied it, but it got me thinking. I’d always wished that Mia was yours so I’d have something to remember you by. I need you to know, I always loved my daughter, even if her father was that monster.”

Rage’s hand comes up and strokes my cheek, “She’s an awesome kid. I don’t see how anyone couldn’t love her and want to be her father.”

“I wish you were,” I say, my voice thick with tears.

“Darlin’ I’m her father. I don’t care what the DNA says,” Rage’s voice is hoarse, and I see something dark flash over his face.

“What is it?” I ask.

“This morning, it was when I was dying Mia’s hair and I caught sight of us in the

mirror. Seeing us that close I couldn't ignore the resemblance. When I asked her when her birthday was and she told me, I did the math. Obviously then I didn't know what had happened with Ashton, but before I went to the clubhouse, I took a sample of her hair and mine for a DNA test. I wanted to know. I'm sorry I went behind your back, Prissy. I should have just talked to you and asked."

I turn to look at him, "I'm as guilty as you are. When I started having suspicions, I should have said something. But I was afraid of how you might react. I'd overheard you telling that nurse that there was nothing going on between us and you weren't the settling down type."

"That's just me and my big mouth. It's true, after you left me, I didn't want to get into another relationship. At that moment I still thought you'd ran off, I didn't know what your parents had told you."

"I guess that makes sense," I say.

"I feel terrible about believing the letter your parents gave to me. I guess you were at college when I kept coming to your house. They told me over and over again for a month that you didn't want me. They finally gave me the letter and it crushed my soul. I thought you were my forever girl."

"I hate what my parents did to us, Rage. If I could go back in time, I'd never give up on us."

His steady gaze never falters, and he takes my hands in his. "Look Prissy, the whole reason why I turned Mariam down and a dozen more just like her over the years is that they all pale by comparison to you. You were my one, Priscilla. If I couldn't have you, I didn't want to settle down with any woman. I was only ever going to be the settling down type for you, Prissy girl."

I launch myself at him and wrap my arms around his neck. Rage laughs and pulls me into his lap.

“I love you, Rage. I’ve been so lost and miserable all these years without you.”

He responds playfully, “Good thing you had a little mini me, to remember me by.”

I tear up, “Mia looks so much like you and even her mannerisms are similar to yours. But what if she isn’t?”

He brings his hands up to cup my face, “If you would have me, I’m gonna be the best damn dad that little girl ever had. Doesn’t matter what the test says. I loved having you both in my life before I knew she might be mine, so it’s not gonna change a damn thing.”

I feel my entire body relax.

He leans forward to give me a kiss. “You’re the only woman I’ve ever truly loved. You were beautiful, sweet, and opened your heart to me just when I needed it the most. I never got past losing you, but I loved you enough to let you leave me if you thought it would bring you a better life. I’m still in awe of you for preferring my small house to the mansions your family and the Whitmores call home.”

“I never liked the trapping of wealth, sure having all that stuff makes life easier, but what really matters is love. And there was none of that. Yet seeing you, your club, how you are with Ven and Meli, that’s love and that’s more important than anything money could buy. And I love that you have your club brothers backing you up and keeping you safe.”

“Keeping us safe, you mean.”

“Yeah,” I tell him. “I was nice to have your club brothers show up to help tip the balance in our favor. I can’t thank them enough.”

“I’ll be sure to give them your thanks. But now I want to talk about our future.”

I shake my head adamantly. “I’ve already decided I’m not leaving your house ever again. Everything I want and need is right here. If you want me to leave, you’re gonna have to throw me out and lock the door.”

“I would never ask you to leave, Prissy. In fact, I want you to marry me. It’s not the romantic proposal I wanted to do, but if today has taught me anything it’s that you have to say what’s on your mind now. You can’t park it away for another day, because you never know what’s coming. When I got home and found your note, I thought you’d gone again, that me being an asshole this morning had ruined what we’d been building. I’m not risking that ever again, will you marry me Prissy girl?”

My breath gets caught in my throat and I honestly can’t believe he just proposed. He can see that I’m stunned, so he tries to smooth things over.

“We can have a long engagement if you want. I don’t care how long it takes us to get to the altar. I just want you to wear my ring and know that we’re on the right track to get to the altar.”

He sweeps his hand inside of his cut and pulls out a very pretty marquise cut diamond engagement ring. The stone is smaller than most, but the design is elegant and just my style. I never liked large ostentatious pieces of jewelry. I hold out my hand, let him slip it on my finger and admire how it looks on my hand. “It’s so pretty. Where did you get it?”

“I’ve had it put away for eleven long years. It’s the one I bought to propose to you when we were eighteen, innocent, and didn’t know how cruel the world could be. I’d

planned on doing it before you went off to college, but...”

His words trail off.

Our talk has been an emotional rollercoaster, and this last bit of sweetness causes the long-awaited tears to flow like nobody’s business. He quickly dries the tears from my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “Don’t cry, Prissy girl. From now on I’m gonna make sure that nothing bad ever happens to you.”

“Or our daughter, right?”

He nods and pulls me close against his chest. “Of course Mia too. I’ll rip off anyone’s head who gives her a hard time.”

I nod, fighting back the tears. “You were pretty brutal to Ashton earlier.”

“He fucked with the wrong man. I’m not going to let that ignorant asshole steal my woman and my child. He’s lucky my club officers got there to pull me off him because I was dead set on beating the everloving shit out of him. The thought of him laying his hands on you against your will made me mental.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” I ask.

“My club brothers will decide. But if I have any say in the matter, I know what I want done with him. But whatever happens, he’s never gonna be a problem for you again.”

Rage

If I had my way, then Ashton was being driven out to the desert and given a dirt nap. I wasn't sure what my club brothers had planned. I guess the other option to get him out the picture involved the evidence we found on his flash drive. That and whatever else he had on his PC—which Zen was currently analyzing, might get him sent back to a psychiatric unit. But this time not some cushy spa resort like Malcolm had him in.

We sit in silence for a while finishing our wine. I'm still coming to terms with the fact that Priscilla has agreed to marry me when she turns to me and pulls me close. The moment her lips land on mine I'm all fired up. My cock is punching at my zipper, zero to sixty in ten seconds flat. Her soft hand runs down my chest to my stomach. She's had a traumatic day and sometimes that adrenaline surge can make a person horny as hell. Even though the thought of taking her to bed is the best end to the worst day, I don't want her doing something that maybe she doesn't want to do, "If you're not up to it after your ordeal today, we can just snuggle up and sleep," I tell her. "I don't want you to feel pressured into riding my cock."

She grins at me. "Who's being pressured? Sounds like the perfect end to a day."

"You sure you're all in, Prissy?"

She nods enthusiastically and her open acceptance is like a ray of sunshine beaming right into my soul. I jump to my feet, scoop her up and toss her over one shoulder. She laughs as I march upstairs to my bedroom carrying her caveman style.

I drop her on the bed, I was about to start undressing her, but she beats me to it, pulling off her clothes. This woman can't get naked for me fast enough, something about that fills my chest with pride.

I'm surprised when my naked fiancé gets off the bed to stand in front of me. She runs her hands up my chest, sliding off my cut. She folds it respectfully in two and lays it over the back of a chair. Then she unbuttons my shirt and tosses it aside before dropping to her knees and working on my pants. When she unbuckles my belt, a hot bolt of excitement lances across my chest. My breath catches as she unbuttons my jeans and slides the zipper down before reaching inside to pull out my now pulsating cock. It looks absurdly large in her delicate hands.

I know she's going to put her mouth on me by the look of intense interest on her face. She doesn't waste any time, lavishing the head of my cock with her pink tongue. Nothing has ever felt as good as having sex with Priscilla. The sex we've had since she came back into my life is even more amazing than when we were young. What we share can't be compared to any other woman I've ever been with because Priscilla has my heart. When emotions are involved, everything is always going to be more intense.

By the time she sucks my cock into her mouth, I'm in her thrall. I can't get enough of the pleasure of seeing her lips wrapped around my shaft and the visual of her on her knees pleasuring me. I pull out just before she causes me to spill in her mouth because I want to spill in her tight pussy instead.

I pull her up with one hand and lift her up and onto the bed. "It's your turn, Prissy. I want you on your back on the bed with your hands on the headboard."

When her lovely body is laid out just the way I asked, I say, "I want you to hold onto the headboard and not let go. Can you do that for me, Prissy?"

She replies breathlessly, “Yes. I promise not to let go.”

I tap the end of her nose gently and tell her, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, sweetness.”

Her expression lights up. “Oh, I see. This is a game to see who can last the longest, right?”

I wasn’t thinking exactly like that, but it’s a good idea, so I agree without hesitation. “Yes. If you can hold out longer than I can resist getting inside you, then you win. If you let go before I’m ready, you lose.”

“I don’t care if there is a prize for the winner, I like this game.”

I smile down my sweet love and sweeten the deal. “Whoever wins gets to pick the location of our first couple’s weekend. How does that sound?”

“A couple’s weekend?”

I grin, “We’ve got eleven years to make up for. I think getting away for a few days is just what we need.” I shift so my cock brushes against her slit, I’m fighting the urge not to just get on my knees and lick her pretty pussy until she comes screaming.

She bites her bottom lip. Then she nods. “That’s a pretty good prize. I’m all in.”

I can’t resist her loveliness one second longer, so I lean down and give her a kiss that grows more passionate by the second. It’s scary how quickly our passion flares. Before I know it, we’re tangling tongues as I run my hands over her breasts. Her breasts are fuller than when we were first together because she’s had a child. I wonder briefly what she would have looked like pregnant, a glorious goddess I would imagine.

I kiss my way down to her breasts and nip and lick her nipples until she is moaning with pleasure. When I've made her nipples stand up into taut little points, I move down between her legs. Her legs split open to give me access to her pussy. She smells like heaven, and I can't wait to put my mouth on her. I spread her open with my hands and lick from her wet core all the way up to her clit, giving it a little swirl with my tongue just the way she likes. It doesn't take long before she's writhing in pleasure beneath my mouth.

I think that maybe I'm going to lose our little bet because even now my cock is throbbing like it has a heartbeat of its own. I'm leaking precum on the bedsheets. I should feel bad about that, but I don't. I redouble my efforts and push her into an orgasm that makes her entire body convulse.

"You can let go now darlin', I think you won," I say. She held onto that headboard like a trooper.

When I bring my cock up to run through her glorious slit, rubbing the head over her wet clit her hands come down to grasp my cock and rub it right where she wants. I put my hands on the bed on either side of her body and let her handle me how she likes. Everything with Priscilla is amazing, so I just look down at her closed eyes and open mouth enjoying the expression of pure joy on her face.

When she brings the head of my cock to her core, I take the hint and begin filling her with my thick shaft. She moans words of encouragement, fit to make me never want to pull out. I lower myself and begin pushing and pulling my cock in the way that give her the most pleasure. With her encouragement, I go faster until I'm pounding into her with a steady pace. Her hands come up to scratch at my chest. I adjust the angle of my cock until I am consistently rubbing against her g-spot.

I keep pushing us both higher and higher until we come together, my orgasm is so explosive I feel like I'm filling her to overflowing. While my cock is still buried deep

and twitching, I bend down to kiss her, this time a long leisurely kiss that was meant to communicate how much I love her. She murmured, “I love you too.” I guess she got my unspoken message.

I collapse down onto the bed beside her, and she rolls over to cuddle against my chest.

She murmurs, “You are an amazing sex giver.”

I glance down to see her dreamy expression. “Sex giver? Did you just make up new words tonight?”

“Can’t think. My brain is too tired.”

I chuckle that she’s so messed up from having great sex with me. In this moment I realize I am truly the luckiest man alive.

Priscilla

Two Months Later

I hold up my class schedule for Rage to see. “Becoming an x-ray tech takes only two years. They make good money and it’s something I always wanted to do. What do you think?”

Taking the schedule out of my hand, Rage looks it over. “I say you’re going to be the best x-ray technician in the whole hospital. I’m really proud of you for going back to college to get your degree.”

“They have two-year and four-year programs. I figure if I get through two years, maybe I can go for a four-year degree. If it’s hell on earth, I can just look for a job that only requires an associate’s degree, That’s a good idea, right?”

“Absolutely, Prissy. I just know you’re going to study hard and be good at your job.”

I smile as I look around the lodge he chose for our first couple’s weekend. Even though I won our little bet I decided that Rage could choose where we stayed, and I don’t think I could have picked a better place. I love the little wooden lodge with its view of the beautiful river out the window near our table in the restaurant. It’s just us, Mia is staying with Meli who has become like a grandmother to her. Rage was correct, family isn’t just about blood. But in our case, it is—we got the DNA results back and Mia really is his daughter. I was so happy I cried, Rage did too. I knew with all my heart that he’d love that little girl like his own whatever the results showed, but to know that she was truly his. I felt like I’d given him the best present ever.

A lot has happened in the two months since my parents tried to get me to marry my attacker. I'm not sure what Malcolm and Ashton's fate was, while Rage and I talk about everything and we have a 'no secrets' rule, there's some club business that is 'need to know' only. I guess I didn't really need to know. But he's reassured me that I would never have to worry about that pair ever again.

My mind goes to my parents and what they did to me, I guess I must have looked a bit wistful because Rage asks gently, "Do you want to talk about the sentencing?"

I glance away. "They both got eight years each. It made me angry because it doesn't seem long enough."

"I know, but you have to remember their charges all revolved around their insurance fraud, not around what they did to us all those years ago. There isn't enough of a punishment that would be justice for that."

"I know. The cops didn't recover all the money though. I would have thought the punishment would be stiffer." I hesitate for a moment before adding, "My parents are still upset because they can't get a hold of Ashton or Malcolm. They keep telling everyone that the Savage Legion killed them."

"And you're worried that my club did murder them, right?" Rage asks.

I throw up my hands in a gesture of confusion. "I'm as curious as everyone else."

He takes a deep breath. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes," I tell him decisively, "I'd really like to know." Then just as quickly I change my mind, "No. Maybe I don't. But are you sure they can't hurt me again?"

"You're safe from the Whitmores," Rage says.

Part of me wants to know what happened, but I want to believe the past is in the past. I sit back in my chair, “Then this nightmare is truly over, right?”

“Yes, it is. Malcolm Whitmore deserves to do time like your parents, but rich assholes like him always slip through the net. I don’t think he’s gonna be having such a lavish lifestyle where he ended up. As for Ashton...” he pauses and looks at me, I don’t know if I want to know his fate, but I need some reassurance, so I give Rage a nod to go on. “That evil fucker won’t be harming anyone or anything ever again, you have my word on that. You never have to worry again Prissy girl, I’m always gonna keep you and my little girl safe. You’ve got me and the Savage Legion behind you, no one messes with us.”

“I trust you to handle things, Rage. You know that I do.”

“Oh God!” I gasp. My hands are pressed against the tiles, and I can feel Rage standing behind me. His stiff cock is sliding between my thighs as his fingers pinch my nipples.

The water from the shower is cascading down my body and it all feels like exquisite torture.

His lips brush the back of my neck, and he says, “Damn you are so fucking sexy, I’m gonna burst.”

He shifts his hips, and I feel his cock slip between my folds. I lean forward to make things easier for him and he positions himself at my entrance with a groan.

“Love seeing you soaking and ready for me,” he says, his voice hoarse with lust. He’s still pinching and tugging my nipple and his other hand snakes around my waist, I shudder as his fingers brush my swollen clit.

“I’m so ready, I want to feel you fill me up,” I moan as I rock my hips, impatient for him.

“Fuck, Prissy what are you doing to me?”

With that he slowly slides in and the sensation of fullness as he slips into my drenched pussy is like nothing on earth. It’s as though my body is made for this man.

We’ve already had sex on the bed, the floor, and we’d intended on having a quick shower before heading out for dinner, but one thing led to another, and I’m moaning and gasping as he brings me to another orgasm.

“Rage I’m coming,” I shout as my pussy starts spasming around his cock. It feels like electric shocks are running through me. His talented fingers are rubbing my clit and he’s teasing my hard nipples at the same time. I can feel him pounding into me and the sensual sounds as our bodies slap together take me to another level.

“Fuck,” Rage gasps as he thrusts deep, and his cock starts twitching inside me as he fills me up with his hot seed.

I’m gasping as I feel him pull out, the sensation of emptiness is quickly gone as he pulls me back to his chest and his hand comes down and he starts to rub his come over my clit. While his fingers stroke me to another mind-blowing orgasm, his lips are brushing the back of my neck. He turns me around, so my back is against the cool tiles and his lips capture mine as his fingers slip into my pussy.

He stops kissing me just long enough to say, “I fucking love you Priscilla.” Before his mouth moves further down and he captures a nipple, sucking it to a hard peak.

“I love you, Rage,” I gasp, as his fingers start stroking my g-spot.

It’s with him on his knees in front of me, sucking on my clit and his fingers dancing

inside me that I come for what seems like the hundredth time, and he's there to catch me as my knees buckle.

Finally, we manage to get out of the shower and get dressed.

We're planning on spending most of the time in our room with its hot tub on the porch and a view of the canyons. But before we settle in for our second evening, Rage wants us to go out for a bite to eat. As I head out, I glance around, noticing the place is a ghost town. There had been a few families when we arrived yesterday, but now the place is empty, "Where is everyone? I'd have thought this place would be busy this time of year."

Rage chuckles. "You don't miss much, do you, Prissy girl?"

I couldn't help but smile because I love how sweet he is to me. Rage holds his hand out to me, "Come, sweetness. I have something to show you before we go to the restaurant."

"I hope it's a waterfall," I say enthusiastically.

"Sorry to disappoint, It's not a waterfall."

I let him lead the way, instead of heading to his motorcycle he turns to go up a dirt path. I can hear noise in the distance, and it sounds like there's a party going on. As we turn the corner suddenly, I see it. All our friends have gathered. There are tables and chairs and a long banquet table off to the side. I see Mia with Amy and Louisa running around the large lawn, chasing Barley.

I cling to Rage's arm unsure what to make of the situation. Glancing up at him, I ask, "What's this about?"

Instead of answering me he whistles loudly and waves his hands at a couple of

prospects. They unfurl a huge banner that says, Welcome to Rage and Priscilla's Engagement Party!

My hands fly to my cheeks and I'm both stunned and pleased. "You did this for us?"

He shakes his head. "No. I can't take full credit, I gave them some ideas, but it was the old ladies who planned everything out."

"I'll be sure to thank them," I murmur as I watch everyone laughing and having a great time.

When we step out onto the lawn, the club wives surround us. Cleo, who is the club president's wife, gives me a hug. "Congratulations. Welcome to the Savage Legion MC." The other old ladies flutter around me, making sure I have a warm welcome. For once in my life, I feel loved, respected, and like I'm part of something important.

Meli shows up with boxes of confections and everyone swarms her. I can tell by her smiles and teasing that she is right where she's supposed to be too. There's Ven and his old lady Amy who's now around seven months pregnant. As Rage's blood brother I've gotten close to them too and I love seeing how my sometimes-gruff biker is with his friends.

When I turn to look at Rage, he's standing with his club brothers, full on smiling in my direction. They call him Rage, but unless he's fighting off enemies, I don't think he does much raging anymore. My life has done a one-eighty in the last several months. And I love everything about my new life. Even Mia is adjusting well, developing friendships and growing into the kind of person I always hoped she would be. Before I had a facsimile of a family but now, I have a real one forged through bonds of love.

THE END