



RiffRaff's Reward (Imperial Knights MC: Roanoke, VA #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Jillian

Five years ago, my world came crashing down around my head when my husband died from injuries he received in an auto accident. While it was tragic, the worst part? He had his mistress in the car as well, something I chose not to share with our young daughter, who thought the sun rose and set in her father.

Instead, I went from being a stay-at-home mom to going back to school to get my vet tech certification, and now work for the local animal hospital in Roanoke, Virginia. I don't need to work since Duncan had plenty of life insurance, but I can't just sit around eating bonbons all day long, and since I love animals, I work while Kimber's in school.

I've sworn off men, however, choosing to raise my little girl instead. Someday, I plan to start an animal sanctuary so that those who are adoptable can get their forever home. I even have plans in place for those animals who simply need somewhere to live who aren't suitable for adoption.

However, the best laid plans as the saying goes are tossed out the window the day a tall, silver fox of a biker walks into the clinic with a small kitten tucked into his leather cut. Seems he found the tiny calico on the side of the road when he was stopped for traffic. My motto has always been that anyone who cares for animals has to have some good in them. I just hope I haven't made a mistake.

RiffRaff

Years ago, I had to step down as the President of the Roanoke Raiders MC when I developed Alzheimer's, handing over the gavel to my son, Brick. One somewhat insane day at the clubhouse, I was badly injured and a brother from another chapter healed me. Don't ask me how, because it's way above my understanding. Color me surprised when that included my fading memories, which I'm grateful for seeing as I'm a first-time grandpa with many more to come as soon as my son gets with the program

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PROLOGUE

Jillian, five years ago

I watched as the funeral home took the gurney with my deceased husband out to the hearse, my heart breaking at having to tell our daughter her daddy was gone. From the day Kimber was born, she had her daddy wrapped around her tiny finger, and at eight, this was going to devastate her. Me, on the other hand? Well, Duncan and I were in a weird place in our marriage. He had been cheating on me, so we were actually talking about separating while we sought out marriage counseling.

While I wasn't sure if talking things out would do any good, because something was obviously broken between the two of us if he had chosen to stray and seek out the comfort of another female, for my daughter, our daughter, I would've given it everything I had to give.

"Suck it up, Jillian," I muttered to myself as I gathered his personal belongings from the hospital room before heading home. "You still have to tell Kimber, then you have to go to the funeral home to get all of that tedious stuff started."

My head was pounding by the time I finished sorting everything and got into the school pickup line. Grabbing my acetaminophen from my purse, I shook out three capsules and swallowed them down with my drink. As my SUV filled up with the aroma of pizza, I heard my stomach growl and grinned despite my pain. By the time the back door opened, and Kimber climbed in, I felt nauseated and prayed I could get us home before I was physically sick.

“Hey, Mama!” Kimber exclaimed, her voice about a thousand decibels louder than my brain could handle.

“Hey, sweet pea. Can you use your indoor voice please?” I asked as I pulled up to the stop sign and turned in the direction that would lead us toward home.

“Sorry, Mama, I was outside playing, and I was still in that mood,” she replied, giggling.

“It’s okay, Kimber. Do you have any homework?”

“No, ma’am, we had free time today to get it done in class. Mama, Mrs. Hatcher said I wouldn’t be in school for a few days, so she put some papers in an envelope for me to do. How come?”

I sighed, wishing her teacher hadn’t said anything. “How about we get home and I’ll tell you then, okay?”

“Okay,” she chirped before she started singing along to the radio.

Thank God, I thought to myself. I wanted to be there to hold and comfort her, not sitting behind the wheel driving my car. I was anticipating a lot of tears and wondered if I had any wine at the house or not because I suspected I was going to need some before the night was over.

After Kimber cried herself to sleep, I sat in my bedroom with my laptop open in front of me. While Duncan made good money and we had a healthy savings account, I knew I was going to have to do something to provide for us once those funds ran out. I knew he had a hefty life insurance policy coming our way as well, which would take care of what was left of the mortgage, and we already had an education fund set up for Kimber that was in a separate account, I couldn’t just sit around doing nothing

all day long. Not with the other bills that would be piling up once the life insurance and our savings ran out.

“Maybe it’s time to see what it would take to become a vet tech,” I mused as the television played in the background. I’ve always had a passion for animals. “Surely it wouldn’t take long, and maybe some of the classes I took years ago would transfer over toward that degree.”

Within a few minutes, I had pulled up the local college’s website and was reading over the requirements. “I can do this in two years,” I cried out. “I wonder if I can reach out to the local animal clinic and see about something part-time while I’m working toward my certification. I have to make sure I can be home by the time school’s done for the day, though.” I don’t want Kimber alone if I can prevent it.

By the time my eyes grow heavy, I’ve printed off what I needed, filled out the financial aid forms to find out what I qualified for, shut down my laptop, took care of my nightly hygienic duties, then double-checked to make sure the house was locked up for the night. That was always Duncan’s job before he came to bed but it’s mine now, I guess.

Jillian, two years ago

“Jillian, you’ve done so well since you came to work here,” Dr. Webber said as I cleaned up the exam room. “The best thing I ever did was hire you.”

I smiled and said, “I definitely appreciate you working with me these last couple of years. I know it’s not always easy when I have to leave to get Kimber, but with no immediate family left, I don’t want her to be away from me for too long.”

It’s been a rough few years, between working part-time, going to school, and navigating Kimber’s grief, but I finally feel like we’re in a good place. Both mentally

and emotionally. Thanks to therapy that we both attend, we're able to communicate effectively, although with the teen years almost upon us, I worry about my wine consumption. I hope my liver can survive it!

Most days, after I pick her up, we come back to the clinic and she helps me give out the medications, walk any dogs we have staying over, and then we feed and water everyone. Dr. Webber has been a saint, however, because she pays me a full-time wage and I get health insurance as well.

"Hard to believe she's turning eleven in a few weeks," Dr. Webber added. "Seems like only yesterday, a blonde-haired pigtailed little girl with freckles and a few missing teeth walked in and immediately made friends with all the animals here."

Laughing hard, I nod. "We'd have a houseful if I let her bring home every single stray."

Shaking her head in amusement, she asked me, "Are you available to work at the low-cost spay and neuter clinic next weekend?"

I ran through Kimber's schedule in my head and replied, "She's got a sleepover next Friday because it's her friend's birthday and it's a whole weekend deal. They're taking five little girls to Busch Gardens, which Kimber has chattered about non-stop since we got the invitation. So, I'll be there with bells on."

She snickered and touched my shoulder. "Go get your girl. We'll see you back shortly."

Jillian, one year ago

"Can I get some help, please?" a frenzied male voice called.

I walked from the treatment area to the front reception desk and when I spotted him, I prayed my jaw wasn't hanging around my knees. Standing there in all his leather glory was a tall, muscular biker, with a well-trimmed goatee. He had shoved his sunglasses onto his smooth scalp and when he saw me, his smile nearly made me stumble.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

"Found this little cutie on the side of the road when I was in traffic," he said as he opened his leather jacket and gently reached in to pull out a tiny calico kitten.

"Oh, sweet baby," I cooed, holding out my hands. "Well, you're a little thing, aren't you?" I asked as I cuddled the yowling kitten close to my chest, my finger swiping its way between her ears in an attempt to comfort the spooked baby. "Follow me and we'll get her checked out."

He followed behind me as I went into the first exam room and set her down on the table. While I held her, I reset the scale then lifted my hand so I could get an accurate weight. "She doesn't weigh much," he rumbled out, his voice doing something to my insides I wasn't willing to look at too closely.

"She looks to be about five, maybe six weeks old, if that," I advised as I continued with my exam. Dr. Webber was in with another patient, but I was able to do the basics, at least, and I definitely wanted to hear his voice a little longer.

"What's your name?" he suddenly asked. "I'm RiffRaff, with the Imperial Knights MC."

RiffRaff? What an odd name, my mind whispered.

"Jillian Andrews."

CHAPTER ONE

RiffRaff

I grin as I look at my phone. I can't believe that it's been a year since I started seeing Jillian. The first five or six months, our dates were during the day while her daughter was at school, but this weekend, I'll finally meet her. She knows about me, of course, but understandably, Jilly wanted to take the time necessary for us to become familiar with one another. Kimber wasn't happy that her mom was dating, but apparently, when she complained to her therapist, she was told that her mother was allowed to be happy. Granted, Kimber doesn't know why her mom isn't willing to sacrifice the rest of her life to her dead husband, and unless push comes to shove, she doesn't ever plan to tell her, so she was resistant at first.

Still, even though this whole relationship thing is new for me since I think the last time I dated anyone might've been in high school. Of course, I got the best part of that when that bitch dropped Brick off to me and hit the road. It wasn't easy being a teenaged father by a longshot, but I had my mom to help, plus the ol' ladies stepped in as well whenever I was out on a run. Thankfully, when I took over the gavel, I made us mostly legit, with only a few morally gray things we did as a club.

There was no way I was gonna leave my boy to grow up on his own while I spent time in a concrete box or heaven forbid, six feet under, so I made those changes. We lost some brothers along the way, but with Brick at the helm, we have a helluva brotherhood these days. Add in the fact that he's got a club princess as his ol' lady and wife, I'm now a grandfather, and life's pretty fucking good from where I'm standing.

RiffRaff: I see Chloe's got y'all trained well.

Jilly: She's a good kitty.

Yeah, she ended up taking the kitten I found on the side of the road home with her for her little girl. Since Ryleigh has her two, and Rory has one as well, I didn't think it would be a good idea to introduce a kitten into the already chaotic mix.

RiffRaff: We still on for dinner with Kimber before her overnight?

Jilly: Definitely. You positive about this?

RiffRaff: Never more certain. I'm about to head into church, Jilly, so it may be a little while before I answer back.

Considering it's been fucking years since I've been with a woman, since shortly before my original diagnosis, it's past time for 'this' as far as I'm concerned. However, I respect Jilly enough that I haven't pushed the issue of sex. She's worth the wait, even though I haven't told anyone I've been seeing her.

It's not because I'm embarrassed either. The brothers already suspect something's going on since I take off most days to see Jilly. It's more that I wanted us to get to know each other, and as crowded as the clubhouse has been with our Cedar Creek brothers staying in Roanoke right now, I didn't want to send her running down the road until I had her good and hooked.

Jilly: Bikers go to church? LOL.

Silly woman, she knows what it means, but it makes me chuckle because this is what she says every time I bring up that we're headed into church. And trust me, ever since Kracken's shit exploded so spectacularly, we've had more of them than I think

there's been in the history of this chapter, regardless of the club's name!

I can't wait to introduce her to Brick, Ryleigh, and my sweet Aubree, as well as the rest of the chuckleheads who I call brother. Hopefully, the women will balance out those assholes. That thought has me snickering until I hear Brick ask, "What's going on, old man? You losing your marbles again?"

"Fucker, no I'm not, and when I'm ready to tell you what's happening in my personal life, I will."

"He's got a woman, Brick, I told you that already," Banshee states, smirking at me.

"Don't we need to get this shit going?" I question. "Because you called church if I recall."

Brick rolls his eyes at me, and I want to smack him upside his head. Disrespectful fucker. I may have been in the clouds for a while, but I'm not any longer and I'll kick his ass if I need to. It's a father's prerogative to keep his kid in line regardless of his age. I'll threaten to bend him over my knee until my dying day if there's a reason to. Hell, I wonder how he's gonna feel when I do introduce Jilly to the club. I'm only seventeen years older than my own kid, for fuck's sake, and Jilly's close to his age. He's gonna end up with a stepmother who's younger than he is, even though I haven't told her where I see things heading with us.

"Leave him alone," Ryleigh decrees. "Hey, Pops," she says, dropping a kiss on my cheek. "You wanna watch Aubree later?"

"After church, sweet girl," I reply.

"Church!" Brick bellows.

“Shut the fuck up, we got shit to discuss,” Brick commands.

It’s just the Roanoke chapter today since everything’s been quiet on the Fundamentalist fuckers. As everyone settles, I hear a meow and look down to see Sassy, Rory’s cat, climbing up Banshee’s leg to curl onto his lap.

Snickers reverberate when she starts purring because she’s loud as fuck. Brick just shakes his head in humor and then lifts his chin toward Rainman, our treasurer.

“Well, y’all, we’ve got a bump in our pay heading your way,” Rainman says, glancing at his laptop. “Us taking over the laundromat from the Brewer family is paying off in leaps and bounds.”

We all cheer and fists pound on the table. We have a few other legit businesses, and they pull in steady money, but the laundromat was a new venture that was drowning in debt before we took over. I raise my hand and ask, “And that’s including the free Saturdays we do monthly for the homeless?”

“Yeah, they don’t pay to wash and dry their clothes, but the other businesses have been donating money to run the machines,” Rainman replies. “So, we don’t lose anything at all income-wise on those days.”

One of the girls had seen on social media that a small town somewhere in Georgia does that as a ministry of sorts. While we’re not church-going folks as a rule, we are all about helping our own community through various charities, so we jumped at the chance to buy the laundromat when the family decided they wanted out.

Rainman then continues and says, “Adding customization to helmets is helping the body shop’s numbers as well.”

We found someone with some serious artistic talent who does custom paint jobs on

the bikes we build, and they had mentioned doing helmets as well. Rainman did a cost analysis and found we could keep our overhead low and still charge a whack to those weekenders who want ‘everything to match’ when they’re riding. We’re still cheaper than several other shops within a hundred-mile radius who offer the same thing, but as long as we’re making bank, I really don’t care.

Hell, even though I was ‘retired’, I still got paid every month. I tried to get Brick to take it back and he growled at me, so I gave up and have invested a good chunk since I plan to live a very long time now.

The meeting continues as each of the brothers who handles a business brings up any concerns they have and before I know it, I hear Brick say, “Adjourned!”

I pick up my phone from the box the prospect’s holding and head to the common room for a beer, snickering again because now Sassy is riding on Banshee’s shoulder as he walks ahead of me.

“Sassy! There you are, you naughty girl,” Rory exclaims. “You know that women aren’t allowed in church.”

Raucous laughter at her statement floats around me as I reach the bar. Before I can say anything, Jadyn has the top popped off a longneck and is sliding it toward me. “Thanks,” I say as I tip it back and take a long swallow.

“You don’t miss having the gavel?” Kracken asks as he takes the stool next to me, Moira tucked under his arm. She waves but doesn’t say anything. Of course, she still doesn’t talk all that much after surviving her ordeal.

“Fuck no,” I retort. “It’s like herding a bunch of scalded cats. Brick’s more than capable of dealing with y’all.”

Jadyn gives me another beer and I tap the bar top before heading over to the couches so I can see my granddaughter. After setting my beer on the end table, I scoop her from Ryleigh's arms then blow raspberries against her neck, which has her giggling.

"How's my girl?" I ask as she gives me a somewhat sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Gampa!" she exclaims, clapping her toddler hands against both of my cheeks before she tugs my goatee.

"Aubree," I reply, rocking her from side to side. "When are you gonna have a little brother or sister?"

"Your son wants to wait," Ryleigh says.

"My son? Not your husband?" I question.

"He's your son when he's on my shit list, my husband when he's not," she teases. "Right now, he's on the list."

I snicker, because there could be any number of reasons why he's found himself in the doghouse, from not helping with Aubree to forgetting to get one of the prospects to pick something up that she asked him to get.

"Guess you'll be waiting a little while longer," I whisper to Aubree. Still, I'm loud enough that Ryleigh hears me, which makes her giggle.

With a sly grin on her face, she informs me, "Oh, we may be waiting even though I don't want to, but that doesn't mean we don't still practice."

"Lalala, I can't hear you," I say, just as Rory walks up and plops down next to Ryleigh.

“Practice what?’ Rory asks.

“Making babies,” Ryleigh replies with a straight face.

“And with that, Aubree and I are going out to the playset,” I retort before turning and heading through the kitchen which leads to our huge backyard.

“Pretty girl, you’re too young to be hearing that kind of stuff,” I tell Aubree as I buckle her into the special swing that Brick got for her.

For a man who used to be an adrenaline junkie, who probably took off ten years of my life with all the stunts he, Kracken, and Banshee used to pull, he’s turned into a Nervous Nellie where his baby girl is concerned. Every inch of the clubhouse has been baby proofed now that she’s walking really well, the cabinets in the kitchen all have child locks on them, the doorknobs have these weird covers that are harder than fuck to twist open, and there are a shit ton of baby gates around to keep her secure and in whatever room they want her to stay in. He’d bubble wrap her if he thought Ryleigh wouldn’t blow her top.

I know eventually, there’ll be more babies, but my son cracks me up. I don’t even dare think about her when she starts to date at forty.

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CHAPTER TWO

Jillian

“Are you sure I’ll like him, Mom?” Kimber asks as we head to the restaurant we’re meeting RiffRaff at for dinner.

“Positive, sweetie,” I reply.

“Is he tall like Dad was?” she questions.

I stop and think about the two men and after mentally comparing them, I shake my head. “No, RiffRaff’s taller, believe it or not. He’s also very muscular, has tattoos, shaves his head, and rides a motorcycle.”

“Oh! Like Jax Teller?”

I snicker then ask, “And what do you know about Jax Teller?”

“Katie’s mom lets her watch it and she has a poster of him on her wall.” Then she shoots me a look that has ‘bad mom’ written all over it. Some parents may be comfortable with all of the sex and violence that takes place on that show, but I’m not. I’d like to shelter her from those things for a little longer. Before I know it, she’ll be sixteen and I’ll have to face the fact that she’s interested in some of those things. Including the mutiny. But until that happens, I’d like her to live inside my blissful bubble of ignorance alongside me.

“Well, you’re too young to watch it as far as I’m concerned. But he is a biker in a club, although they’re not like the club in that show.”

“Good. She says there’s a lot of shooting in it,” Kimber advises doing a full body shiver.

I don’t know if RiffRaff carries a gun, but I suspect he probably does and since he’s told me about the businesses the club owns and operates, I highly doubt he’s in very many shootouts. Pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant, I’m happy to see that RiffRaff’s already there, standing in a space next to his motorcycle. As I pull forward into the spot, he moves to the side, a smile playing on his lips.

“Is that him, Mom?” Kimber asks, staring wide-eyed and a little starstruck through the passenger window at RiffRaff.

“Yeah, baby,” I reply as I put my SUV in park and shut it down. He immediately goes to the passenger side after motioning me to wait and opens Kimber’s door before crouching down so they’re eye-to-eye. I sit back with my purse and keys clutched in my hand and watch as he valiantly enchants my baby girl.

“Hey, Kimber, I’m RiffRaff and I’m very glad to meet you,” he says, endearing me to him forever.

Or maybe it’s his voice which is smooth yet gravelly, kind of like a shot of top shelf whiskey.

“Hey,” Kimber replies. “I um, I was going to open my door.”

“A lady’s door is always opened for her if a man is around,” he says, standing up and moving back so she can get out of my car. “Now, let me go get your mom and we’ll head in and get some of the best steaks around.”

“I like chicken,” Kimber whispers, almost to herself. My pulse quickens as I fear he’ll take her words as an insult. She’s acting surly, but once she warms up to him her attitude will change. But instead of reacting with a scowl or argumentative words, because that never works with a prepubescent teenager, he shoots her a wink and then gives me a pearly white grin.

He turns from where he was coming to the driver’s side and pins her with a smile. “Sweetheart, you can order whatever you want as long as you’re not wasteful. I happen to know, though, that they have combo dishes, so if you prefer chicken but kind of want steak too, you can get one of those.”

“They do?” she asks with awe in her voice as she follows him to the driver’s side where I’ve been patiently waiting for him.

Kimber and I occasionally go out to eat, of course, but we’ve never made it to this restaurant so neither of us have a clue what is offered outside of steaks since ‘steakhouse’ is in the name. Thankfully, with Duncan’s investments, our savings, and the life insurance policy, plus my own frugal nature, we’re not hurting for money, but I was waiting for something big to celebrate, like her thirteenth birthday or even an award from school. My plan was to let her bring Katie along, of course, since they’re BFFs for life, and we’d get all dressed up.

“Absolutely,” he states before he opens my door and holds out his hand.

Taking it, I allow him to help me stand. Once the car door is closed and I’ve locked it using my key fob, he leans in and brushes a butterfly kiss across my cheek. If I were a teenager, I know I’d swoon, but instead, I have to act like this is an everyday thing and it most certainly is not!

“Katie’s gonna be so jealous, Mom,” Kimber brags as RiffRaff holds the door and ushers us inside.

“Who’s Katie?” RiffRaff asks.

She looks up at him and replies, “My best friend.”

“Always good to have close friends,” he says. “Got a few of them myself, and so does my son.”

“You have kids?” Kimber questions as we follow the hostess to the booth she’s leading us to after RiffRaff gave her his name.

“One, a son named Brick,” RiffRaff advises as he settles in across from us, his back to the wall.

I had noticed that he always did that and asked him one time when we were out why, and he told me then it was so he could see the entire establishment and be prepared for anything coming our way. Since he also walks on the outside of ‘danger’ whenever we’re in town meandering down the sidewalk, I don’t question it any longer.

Her eyes widen but before she can ask another question, a server comes by and takes our drink orders before putting rolls and cinnamon butter as well as menus down in front of us. I watch my daughter gazing around the five-star restaurant, her eyes saucer wide with wonder and am glad that RiffRaff chose this place for their initial meeting. Needless to say, she’s impressed.

“Help yourselves, ladies,” he says as he snags a roll and proceeds to slather butter all over it. At my glance, he winks and states, “Cholesterol’s fine, darlin’, I promise.”

His comment has me giggling as I take my own roll and put far less butter on mine than he did, while Kimber does the same. When I bite into mine, I moan in delight when the warm bread and butter combo hits my tastebuds. “Oh, my goodness, now I

understand why you put so much on, this stuff is phenomenal!”

“Mom, these are really good,” Kimber mumbles around her stuffed face.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” I chide, my mom hat fully in place. RiffRaff chuckles as he finishes his first roll then proceeds to butter another one.

“Mom,” Kimber drawls out once she’s chewed and swallowed.

“Let’s check out the menu,” I suggest, not wanting her to show her snarky, teenage side. While I know he’ll eventually see it because I’m hoping he’s gonna want to be around for a long time, I don’t want it to happen within the first thirty minutes of them meeting.

I smile in euphoric contentment at the fact that RiffRaff insisted on following us home and making sure that we made it to our destinations safely. There aren’t many chivalrous men around anymore and I’m enjoying the fact that he is. The look on Katie’s face when he pulled up behind me as we dropped Kimber off was one of amazement, and I anticipate that Kimber is going to embellish the dinner with RiffRaff.

“I think that went well,” I murmur as RiffRaff and I walk up the steps to my porch.

I did downsize from the house that Duncan and I owned, but that was more for practical purposes since I never really cared for the house itself. Instead, I found a sprawling farmhouse with a wraparound porch, a huge backyard, and established, mature trees that line the long, winding driveway. I have more bedrooms than just the two of us really need, but what sold me on it was the fact that each bedroom, except the Jack and Jill set-up that’s on the second floor, has its own ensuite bathroom and workable fireplaces in each bedroom.

Plus, there's a vanity area in it which has given Kimber and Katie hours of enjoyment as they try out various makeup looks they've seen on TikTok videos. I have no qualms about them practicing their 'look' even though both sets of parents agree that they aren't to wear their made-up faces outside of either of our homes. They're also learning how to take care of their skin, which a lot of people don't start doing until later in life. Since my skincare routine focuses on my actual skin, and I wear minimal makeup, mine isn't as full of brushes, eyeshadow palettes, and perfumes as my daughter's is. Actually, hers looks like Ulta exploded in an array of colors and scents, but she's happy, so that's all that matters.

"She seems like a good kid," he replies as he takes my keys and unlocks the front door before opening it. I quickly disarm my alarm and see his approving nod as he closes and locks the door. Before I can go any further, he says, "Let me check it out first, Jilly."

He turns on all of the lights then prowls through all of the rooms before being satisfied it's safe for me to enter. Once he makes it back to me, he places his hand on my lower back and ushers me inside.

"The alarm was on, RiffRaff," I reply in protest. "Surely, no one is here but us."

"It eases my mind, darlin'," he says.

I remind myself that he's old school, and instead of arguing with him over the fact that I enter my home every day that ends with a 'Y' on my own and count on my system to work proficiently, I settle with telling him, "Okay, that's fine."

Despite the fact that we've been seeing each other officially for about six months now, we've kept things PG. Oh, he holds my hand or guides me with his hand on the small of my back, but outside of quite a few swoon worthy kisses, we haven't gone any further and I find myself nervous all of a sudden.

Duncan was the first man I ever slept with and that had stopped about eight months before his death. Since then, there's been no one else as I was focused on Kimber, school, and working. Not only that, but his actions beforehand have me questioning myself and my sexual prowess as far as an intimate relationship goes. I obviously wasn't good enough to keep my husband satisfied and from straying outside of our marriage vows, how can I expect to keep RiffRaff from doing the same?

"What has your brow furrowing, Jilly?" RiffRaff asks. "If you're not ready, we can wait."

"It's not that," I slowly reply. "It's just that... I mean... well, I'm nervous, RiffRaff. What if I'm no good?"

He throws his head back, laughter bubbling out of him, and I gaze in astonishment at how free and open he looks right now. Pulling me into his arms he leans down and kisses my forehead and says, "Babe."

Wait, that's it? Just 'babe' as a response?

"Any man worth his salt who knows what he's doing will make it so both parties enjoy themselves," he finally says. "I'm taking from your response that you're feeling insecure so maybe I need to show you what you do to me. And for the record, it's been a longass time for me, Jilly, so you're gonna need to go easy on me."

CHAPTER THREE

RiffRaff

She has a stunned look on her face, and I mentally curse the fucker that put those doubts in her head. Jilly's a beautiful woman, but more than that, she's got a good heart. During our dates, I've watched how she interacts with others, and she treats everyone with heartfelt kindness and compassion. I know he stepped out on her and had apparently been doing so for at least a year, possibly longer which shocks me.

I don't understand men or women who cheat on their significant others. To me, it's simple as fuck. You decide you want someone new but are married or committed to someone else? Break it off. Instead, there are countless selfish fucks out there who destroy someone else's self-worth and confidence because they couldn't keep their dicks in their pants, or their legs crossed and closed.

But I wasn't lying to her. The last time I had a woman in my bed was about half a year before my initial diagnosis. I had been feeling off but wasn't willing to see a doctor until the day Brick found me at the clubhouse, disoriented as hell. I was in the common room and thank goodness none of my other brothers were around because I was naked, standing in the corner taking a piss. When he asked me what the fuck I was doing, I turned and asked him, "Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in my clubhouse?"

Yeah, it was definitely not one of my finer moments. It didn't take much convincing for me to go to the doctor after that episode and at our next church, I turned over the gavel, then went to live at an assisted living facility that catered to those with

‘memory’ issues, which was a nice way of saying I was losing my mind.

Brick, however, wasn’t happy with how I was deteriorating, so he brought me back to the clubhouse so he could watch over me himself, got me a motorized scooter since I couldn’t ride any longer, and life got easier, even though I didn’t understand much of what was happening. I still thought I was the president of the club, for fuck’s sake!

Shaking my head, I brush my lips across hers, not missing the shiver that runs through her body at the contact. She’s definitely responsive as hell, and I thank the maker that I found her, that’s for damn sure. I decide to step it back a little bit further and ask, “Got any beer? Then, how about you show me your home.”

I see relief briefly flash in her eyes as she nods and know I’m doing the right thing by pulling back and giving her some breathing room. She slips off her shoes and puts them on the mat by the door, so I crouch and untie my boot laces and do the same. Taking her hand in mine, I tease, “Lead the way, Jilly.”

“Okay, our first stop is the kitchen for a drink because this is more than a nickel tour,” she sasses back, grinning up at me.

As we walk, I notice how homey her place is and relax even further. The colors she’s used are warm and inviting and make me never want to leave. In fact, I can picture myself here, with her and Kimber, until I draw my last breath.

“Wow,” I say as we make it into the kitchen. A huge bay window is over the farmhouse sink, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a butler’s pantry behind a sliding barn door.

“This is what sold me on the house,” she admits. “Well, there are a few more things, of course, but I love to cook, and the views are gorgeous when the sun sets and rises as I clean up after making a meal.”

She releases my hand and goes to the refrigerator before coming back to me with a beer, which happens to be my preferred choice, and a bottle of water for herself. “What’s behind that door?” I question, pointing to the hung barn door.

“Oh! You have to see this,” she exclaims, before sliding it open and proving my previous thoughts right. “It’s a butler’s pantry, and it allows me to stock up whenever there are sales.” Then, with a blush covering her cheeks, she admits, “I’m frugal by nature, so ensuring I always have whatever we might need is important to me.”

I whistle as I see the well-organized shelves. Glancing over, I notice that there are dates that have been handwritten on the tops. “What does this mean?”

I wasn’t kidding when I decided that I want to know her inside and out. At this point, it’s more than physically wanting her. I want to know her fears, her dreams, her long-term goals.

“I put the expiration dates on them so I can make sure I use the older stuff first before it expires,” she tells me. “And I put the perishable stuff in airtight containers because sometimes, there are field mice that try to come in and hibernate when we have colder weather. The last thing I want to do is come face-to-face with a furry body as it digs into my oatmeal.”

Snickering, I pull her close and kiss her temple. “Yeah, while I’m good with all living things, there are places they don’t belong, like my food. We had a problem at the clubhouse once and lost a shit ton of perishables, so we do the same thing.

“So, we walked through the living room, but there’s a half-bath underneath the stairwell. I’m not sure you’d be able to use it, though,” she murmurs, her index finger tapping her chin.

“Why not?” Now my curiosity is roused.

“Come and see,” she says, a mischievous glint in her eyes. When we get to the closed door and she opens it, I burst out laughing.

“This is fit for my granddaughter, at best,” I manage to say through my chuckles.

“There’s another full bath down this hallway,” she replies, moving down a hall to the left so she can point it out.

While all of the rooms are decorated, it’s obvious they’re not all used. She doesn’t show me the room at the far end of the hall, and I suspect it’s where we’ll eventually end up but don’t say anything as she starts making her way up the stairs. Following behind her isn’t a hardship and I find myself adjusting my dick watching her heart-shaped ass shimmy with each step.

Kimber’s room is an explosion of girly girl shit, the floral scent almost overpowering. She shakes her head, scrunches up her nose and says, “She and Katie go overboard when it comes to trying out perfumes. Need to talk to her about it again because it smells like what I imagine a brothel does.”

“Looks like Brick and Ryleigh have something to look forward to,” I reply, once again chuckling at the thought. I suspect my son’s head will explode once Aubree becomes a teenager and I for one am here to see how he behaves.

“Will he even let her wear makeup?” Jilly asks, grinning at me. “I mean, you’ve shared plenty of stories, so I suspect it’ll be a hard no from him.”

“Ah, but he has Ryleigh to temper him,” I tell her. “Plus, the other ol’ ladies will stick up for my princess.”

“So, he’s gonna have his work cut out for him.”

“Definitely. Jilly, you have a beautiful home. It’s got a ‘welcome home’ feel to it if that makes sense.”

“Thank you. It’s how I feel every time I cross the threshold. My old place... well, after what I found out, it wasn’t the same. I couldn’t handle the vibe within the walls, it felt dirty and cheap.”

Taking her hand, I pull her close and kiss her. Once we’re both breathless, I lean my forehead against hers and give her my vow. “Jilly, I will never knowingly hurt you in that manner. Not gonna say I won’t be an asshole from time to time. I think it’s genetically ingrained in most, if not all, men, to be that way, but I won’t ever disrespect you or what we’re building by stepping out on you.”

“You don’t have to make that promise, RiffRaff,” she says. When I go to protest, she holds up her hand. “We’ve taken things slow, probably a lot slower than you would like, but it’s let me get to know you as a man. I know you’re loyal and full of integrity, handsome, and you’d never do that to any woman, whether or not it was me. It’s not how you’re built.”

I’m not surprised she hit the nail on the head as far as my character goes. While I was steeped in the MC long before I prospected and became a full patched member, I watched the brothers and how some of them would cheat on their ol’ ladies and wives and vowed then I’d never be that kind of man. To know that Jillian sees that in me has me puffing up my chest with pride. I may have done things over the years that I wasn’t particularly proud of, but this is something important.

“I don’t have to, but I will. You’ve grown to mean a lot to me, sweetheart. How about we head downstairs and get comfortable, maybe watch a movie?”

Relief flashes across her face and I know I’m on the right track with keeping her in her comfort zone. Hell, if all we do is sleep tonight, I’ll be content as long as she’s in

my arms. It probably makes me sound like a pussy, but I feel like I've got a new lease on life and I'm holding on with both hands.

"This is your sanctuary," I state as I look around the lavender and gray walls. The soothing feeling that permeates the room is mind blowing.

"Yeah, we live in the rest of the house, of course, but after Kimber goes to bed, I come in here and hang out."

My eyes start at the bedroom door and note the sitting area to the left, with huge windows that have plants set out on a small table. There's a chaise lounge that's currently holding a sleeping cat and I chuckle. "Chloe?" I ask, pointing to her.

"Yeah. She's the reason I have to keep my desktop closed," she replies, pointing to the small rolltop desk in the corner. "She gets up there and 'helps' me when I'm paying bills or doing some online continuing education. Makes me crazy when I forget to close it because I'll come in and there'll be papers and envelopes scattered everywhere. And it's not like she doesn't have toys either! Her favorite trick, though, is to pull the papers off the printer as they come out."

"You little stinker," I tease, leaning down and lightly stroking the cat. "Who knew such a little thing would cause such havoc."

"She's a good girl," Jilly says. "She just wants attention."

"I saw where you've got several cat trees in the house, even Kimber's room."

"I am a firm believer that cats need plenty of snoozing spots. Chloe likes being with her people, so when we're gone, she'll sleep in here because she's come to know that I end up in my room every day."

“Makes sense. Do you want me to light a fire?” I ask.

“It’s ready to go, I just had all of the chimneys cleaned so feel free,” she says. “I’m um, gonna get into something more comfortable before we watch a movie if that’s okay.”

“Jilly, it’s your house, honey, so go get comfortable,” I tell her, walking to the fireplace that’s tucked into the other corner. A ceiling fan lazily spins overhead, and I grin, because I suspect my woman is one of those who lets it run year-round, even during the harsh winter days. The fact that I see a fuzzy throw at the end of the bed makes me think my suspicions are right. While I take care of the fire, I see Jilly come back into the bedroom with a huge bucket of popcorn, a soda for her and another beer for me. She’s now in a pair of sweats with fuzzy socks on her feet.

“Snuck out on me when my back was turned, huh?” I tease, taking my cut off and hanging it over the chair.

“Maybe?” she sasses back. “Now, what are we gonna watch?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Jillian

It's early morning by the time we binge watch a series of action movies, and I wasn't wholly comfortable with the idea of him riding away during the twilight hours. Shyly, I asked him to stay, and he instantly accepted the invitation. Falling asleep with him beside me and waking up with him in my arms sounds like the best way to end and start the day if you were to ask me. Surprisingly, while we made out several times, he didn't push for more, even though my body was primed and ready. I could get used to this, to having him in my space. I just need to see about getting over my mental roadblock and moving forward.

"Fucking gorgeous," he says, his voice gruff from sleep.

"Me?" I ask. "I think you might need glasses, RiffRaff."

"Nope, I have twenty-twenty, sweetheart," he whispers, nuzzling my neck.

My bladder decides to make itself known and I say, "Can you hold that thought? Nature calls."

He chuckles but releases me and I roll out of bed then head into my bathroom, hearing him go to the one on the other side, since I have a 'his and her' bathroom. I take care of business then set about refreshing myself, brushing my teeth then combing out my hair since it was a bit wild and crazy. We end up coming out at the same time and he wraps his arms around me and kisses me soundly then says, "Good

morning, Jilly.”

“Good morning, RiffRaff,” I reply, a blush staining my cheeks.

After spending the night in his arms, something I’m not used to at all since Duncan preferred not to be touching when we slept, I’m feeling a bit... amorous this morning. Since I thought my libido had died years ago, I’m a bit surprised to be honest.

“When do you get Kimber?” he asks.

His heated gaze has me stammering like a lovestruck teenager as I think about why he’d be asking me that particular question.

“She’s coming home tomorrow after lunch,” I admit.

“Then let’s go snuggle some more, sweetheart. It looks like we got an early snow, so it’s gonna be cold as fuck outside.”

“Sounds perfect to me. Do you want me to make you some coffee?”

“I just want you,” he murmurs as he nips my ear lobe.

That one small nip of affection has my libido firing on all cylinders. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt that titillating hum of awareness in my soul, and suddenly, I want him with a desperation I can’t even describe. But there’s still that voice in the back of my mind telling me that even if my body is ready, my heart and mind are not. A feat I want to overcome because the thought of losing him because I’m afraid, isn’t something I’m willing to let happen.

“Um, okay.”

“Jilly, there’s no fucking pressure, babe, I promise,” he states as he leads me back over to the bed.

“It’s been a long time for me, RiffRaff,” I reply.

“I bet I’ve got you beat,” he teases as we both climb into bed and then turn so we’re facing each other.

Scoffing, I tell him, “I sincerely doubt that! You’re… well, you’re hot then toss in the fact that you’ve got that whole silver fox thing going on and there’s probably a horde of women whose hearts have been broken.”

He cups my face with his hands and leans in until our foreheads touch. “It’s been over seven years, I think.”

I do the math in my head then start giggling because the irony is just too much without caffeine. “That means we’re likely in the same boat, probably within a month or two at least.”

I watch his eyes widen almost comically, like one of those shocked cartoon characters when they’re surprised at something that’s happening. “You’re fucking with me right now,” he finally says.

“Nope,” I state, popping my p for emphasis. “I’ve told you that before his accident, we were on the verge of a separation, but it was at least six months or so before that and since then, of course, I’ve been focused on school, Kimber and her active social life, and now work. I had to work through my trust issues where men are concerned because I felt utterly betrayed.”

“Do you know if the other woman who was in the car with Duncan when he crashed survived the accident?” he asks, his arms now around me as his hands run up and

down my back, soothing me.

“As far as I know, she did, but I never spoke to her, of course,” I reply. “I mean, what she did went against the girl code as far as I was concerned.”

“Not wanting to bring up bad memories, Jilly, but I want to play devil’s advocate for a second, okay? Then we’ll see where the morning takes us.”

“Go ahead, RiffRaff.” I’m long past that hurt that smacked into me the moment I was told there was another woman in the vehicle with him when he wrecked.

“What if she didn’t know about you? What if he told her that he was single? People do it all the time,” he gently says.

Well, as gentle as his normally booming voice can, that is, but I still know he’s trying not to hurt my feelings. “Maybe she didn’t, I don’t really know, to be honest. He didn’t wear his wedding ring so there wouldn’t have been a line on his ring finger.”

“Babe, I’m telling you right now, if you and I ever decide to walk down that path, not only will I proudly wear a ring, but I’ll get one tattooed on my finger as well,” he says, kissing me again.

Since he has several he wears, this warms my heart for a number of reasons. First of all, the fact he would be willing to show he was claimed legally makes me want to pounce on him for some reason. Secondly, that he’d put our bond on his finger in such a permanent way tells me that he sees us going the distance even though we haven’t been dating all that long.

“You would?” I question, peering up at him with lovestruck eyes.

“Jilly, you haven’t seen all my tats, but trust me, it’s not an issue to go under a tattoo

artist's gun at all."

I snicker because he's got some impressive ink on his arms and thinking about where else he may have it has my core clenching. He's everything I never knew I needed in a man, and he's shown me countless times that he's what they call 'all in'. At least that's how he comes across to me.

"And will I be seeing those tats anytime soon?" I ask, grinning at him.

"You can see them now if you want," he replies, kissing my nose.

"Then show me what you've got, handsome."

My challenge seems to ignite something inside of him as he quickly pulls his t-shirt from the back of his neck over his head before he flings it off the bed. He's still wearing a pair of sweatpants he had in his saddlebags, but I can feel the unmistakable hardness of his cock pressed against my thigh and lower belly and know I'm more turned on right now than I've ever been in my life.

While my sex life with Duncan was okay, subpar at best, it was almost perfunctory at the end. Kind of like an, 'oh, it's Saturday night, let's do it' without any real spontaneity and minimal foreplay. With just a few kisses and some not-so-comfortable small talk, I'm beyond ready for RiffRaff.

I sit up so I can leisurely look at him, my gaze roaming across his muscular chest which has a smattering of chest hair. It's not too much and not too little since he's definitely all man, it's just right as far as I'm concerned. He has a few tats on his pecs, but his biceps, which bulge nicely, have several, although his forearms are free of any ink. As my eyes continue moving down, I see his well-proportioned cock and wonder if it'll even fit since it's been ages for me.

“It’ll fit, darlin’,” he teases, bringing my attention back to his handsome face. My face feels hot, and I know I’m probably as red as a beefsteak tomato at this point, so I just shrug. “I can promise that by the time I slide into your delectable body, you’ll be able to handle me.”

A shiver courses through me at his gravelly pronouncement and I throw caution to the wind and take off my own pajama top, leaving my breasts bare to him. They’re not as perky as they were when I was younger and before I had Kimber, but I have a decent sized rack he approves of if the small wet spot on his sweats is any indication.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, reaching out to gently caress first one then the other until my nipples are fully erect and aching for his touch. His hands are rough and calloused, yet his touch is almost reverent.

“I um... they aren’t like they were when I was twenty,” I whisper. “Neither is the rest of my body.”

While I will never regret having my daughter whatsoever, pregnancy did a number on my body. My hips are fuller, I have a small pooch I’ve never been able to get rid of, there are silvery stretch marks underneath my boobs and across my lower abdomen where I carried her, and I’ve got a bit more junk in my trunk. Yet, RiffRaff doesn’t seem to give that first fuck.

“I’m not like I was when I was twenty either,” he admits. “I was a scrawny fucker and didn’t reach my full height until I was about twenty-five or so, then started packing on the muscle.”

“Just don’t want you to be disappointed,” I tell him, leaning down to capture his lips with mine so I can feel his chest hair against my nipples.

Ever since Kimber breastfed, they’ve been extremely sensitive, which is why I tend

to wear a padded bra these days since the slightest breeze has them poking out.

“Not a fucking chance,” he replies once he comes up for air. “You good with me touching you?”

And, he just added another point in the pro column, not that I’m keeping score or anything. As soon as I nod, he starts his assault on my body which soon has me panting and writhing. Small kisses, nips, and licks have my nipples turning cherry red. He hasn’t even slipped my pajama bottoms off and I feel like I could detonate.

“RiffRaff,” I whimper. It feels like something is just out of reach, something I’ve never felt before by another’s hand. My biggest secret is I never had an orgasm with Duncan. He never went down on me, said it wasn’t his thing at all, so I learned how to fake it and he was so clueless, he bought it hook, line, and sinker.

I suspect this will be a completely different scenario based on how I’m already feeling.

“I’ve got you, Jilly,” he says.

CHAPTER FIVE

RiffRaff

She's so fucking responsive to the slightest touch that I can already feel the head of my dick leaking like a sieve. I've always been in control of my body, so the fact that our somewhat simple foreplay has me already wanting to blow my load is mind boggling.

"How about I slide these off?" I question, my fingers running right under the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Her face and chest flushes slightly, causing me to chuckle.

"Uh huh," she says, lifting her hips slightly so I'm able to drag them down her legs and toss them over the side.

As I sit back on my heels, my dick thudding against my lower abdomen and stomach, I can see how turned on she is since the apex of her thighs is slick with her arousal. Not only that, but her scent is heady and one I'm sure I'll soon become addicted to, based on my body's reaction.

"Fucking beautiful, Jilly," I tell her, my eyes running up and down her body. Seeing the stretch marks on her lower belly has me smiling because she carried her little girl there, protected against the world until it was time for her to arrive. When she tries to cover herself from my gaze, I gently remove her hands and say, "No, ma'am, don't try to ruin a perfect view."

“RiffRaff, are you sure you don’t need glasses?” she teases.

“What you see as imperfections, I see as a beautifully formed woman who has been pregnant and given birth. Your breasts that you were lamenting about not being as firm as when you were younger? They nourished Kimber. How can that be anything but perfect? And your hips, babe, your hips are made for gripping onto as I fuck you from behind.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she admits. “I guess I never thought about it that way, to be honest.”

“Babe, what a real man wants is a woman who looks and feels like one, not some scrawny thing who can’t take a good fucking. Now, spread those pretty thighs and let me see the promised land.”

She giggles a little bit but opens her legs further, giving me a glimpse of heaven. For the rest of my life, I plan to remember this first time with her. As I drop down so I can settle my shoulders between her thighs, she shrieks a little and tries to pull me away. “You don’t have to do that, RiffRaff,” she says.

“Why, Jilly?” I ask, my breath wafting over her distended clit causing her to shiver as more of her essence coats her pussy lips and thighs.

“Because.”

“That’s not a good enough reason,” I reply, pulling out my president voice. I haven’t used it in years, to be honest, but I think it’ll always be there to call out on command. “Unless it’s something you don’t like, Jilly, I fully plan to feast on your pretty pussy.”

Blushing she replies, “I don’t know if I like it or not.”

Holy shit, she's implying that her ex never ate her out? What a fucking tool. Not that I wasn't already thinking that since he cheated on her, but to elect not to enjoy something that's so natural is beyond my comprehension.

"Then let's find out, shall we?" At her nod, I lower my head and run my tongue through her soaked folds before lightly flicking it against her clit, which elicits a low moan. Encouraged, I do it again then once more until I feel her hands latch onto my head and pull me closer.

Thankfully, I shave my scalp because I suspect she'd be pulling out my hair by the roots as I continue my ministrations. When her moaning increases, I slip my index finger into her warm, wet sheath and start moving it in a slow, steady rhythm as I continue licking and kissing her pussy and clit. Her moans increase and I can feel her channel start to flutter, which is practically strangling the finger I'm currently using to fuck her with. I add a second digit and hear her soft inhale but when I find her G-spot and start stroking it, she starts keening my name as her orgasm hits.

"Ohgodohgodohgod," she moans, her hips thrusting into my mouth as I start easing off slightly so she can come back down. When she shivers and tries to pull away, I kiss her pussy one last time before I raise up and grin down at her.

"Well, is that something you'll want to do again?" I ask as I reach down to the side of the bed and find my jeans.

"Yeah." Her response comes out on a sigh and when I look at her after grabbing a condom from my wallet, I see she already looks sated and well-loved.

"Want more?" I tease as I quickly slide the condom down over my dick.

"Please," she says, sounding prim and proper but definitely looking wanton.

Moving over her so I'm once again nestled between her thighs, I hold my dick and place it against her entrance. "Once we do this, there's no going back, Jillian. You're mine, do you understand?"

"I think so," she replies.

"It means you'll be my ol' lady, sweetheart," I tell her. There's no fucking way I'm ever letting her go, even though I'm not quite ready to bring her around the club.

"RiffRaff?" she asks.

"Yeah, babe."

"Shut up and fuck me." Then, she adds, "Please."

I'm laughing as I enter her because she rarely curses out loud, probably because of Kimber, so to hear her demand I fuck her is funny as hell. Still, by the time I'm fully embedded inside her body, my pubic bone pressed against her clit, I'm no longer laughing.

The sensations are unlike anything I remember, and I've fucked a lot of women in my life. But none of them compare to the enchanting female who's currently writhing beneath me as she tries to get me to move.

"Need me to do something, Jilly?" I tease.

"Move?" she asks. "At least, I think that's what you're supposed to do now."

"Minx," I growl out before I take her lips in a crushing kiss. As I begin to thrust in and out of her, I realize I'm too close to exploding and need to slow my own roll before I embarrass myself.

I rebuild a carburetor in my head while I kiss her, nip her chin and then lower my lips to suck on first one then the other nipple as I drive her passion higher and higher. If the nails currently scoring my back are any indication, she's riding that train up the mountain again and as soon as I can get her to blast off, I'll let myself go.

"Feels good," she pants out, her hips meeting me thrust for thrust. "I'm so full, RiffRaff, and I think I'm going to come again."

"Yeah, you are," I reply, my own breath coming out in short pants. I slip my hand between us and add a little pressure around her clit, hear her voice hitch as her back arches up, and she keens out my name as her pussy strangles my dick. My spine tingles, my balls draw up and I join her, grunting my release out while being sure she rides hers all the way through.

Finally spent, I collapse on top of her, my forearms keeping me off her body just enough so I don't squish her, lean down and kiss her, while sweat rolls down both of our faces.

"Damn," she murmurs against my lips.

"Damn is right," I whisper.

Since I feel like I want to collapse, I roll so she's on top, sprawled across my body, our limbs entwined as I remain buried in her body. My hands roam across her back and her ass while we both try to regain our ability to draw in air without sounding as though we smoke three packs a day.

Eventually, I move her so I can dispose of the condom, then crawl back into the bed and draw her into my arms after pulling the covers over us. As we drift off into a sex-induced nap, I whisper, "We'll get some rest then go for another round."

“Sounds perfect,” she mumbles, her eyes already closed.

You haven’t lost your touch, old man, I think to myself. But I truly expect that the reason it was so fucking good this time is because it was her.

My Jilly.

CHAPTER SIX

Jillian

“You’ve got a glow about you these days,” Dr. Webber says as we prepare a client for surgery. “Care to share?”

I snicker as I continue gathering the instruments we’re going to need from the autoclave. Ever since that magical weekend, we’ve spent as much time as possible with one another, as well as Kimber. I still haven’t been introduced to his club brothers and family, but I know it’ll happen eventually and am patient.

“Actually, we’ve been seeing each other for months now but we finally took it to the next level,” I admit.

“He’s met Kimber?” she asks.

“Yes, and she’s infatuated with the fact that he’s a biker with the Imperial Knights MC. He bought us both our own helmets, and now all she wants to do is ride. I suspect I may have a biker in the making or something.”

She laughs and says, “I’m happy for you Jillian. I know the past few years have been hard, so seeing the pain and darkness in your eyes disappearing has me ecstatic.”

Over the past few years, she and I have become close and one girl’s night out, over copious amounts of alcohol, I shared with her how Duncan’s cheating completely blindsided me. If I didn’t have Kimber, I probably would’ve grieved the loss of my

marriage only then moved on. Instead, because Kimber was far too young to share about her father's indiscretions, I had to walk alongside her with her own grief since she was a daddy's girl, through and through.

"I really like him," I murmur as I walk over to the kennels we keep the animals in when they're waiting for surgery. Opening up the cage, I look at the Pekinese inside and say, "Come on, Charlie Bear, it's your turn." He licks my hand as I scoop him into my arms, his IV for the anesthesia already in place. "We're gonna get you all fixed up," I whisper as I settle him on the table.

"I wish people would abide by the leash laws," Dr. Webber states as I begin to administer the meds necessary to sedate the tiny dog. "This should've never happened."

Charlie Bear's owner called Dr. Webber on her way to the clinic because the little guy was attacked and used as a chew toy by a bigger dog while they were out for a morning walk. He's got quite a few nasty lacerations that need to be thoroughly disinfected then stitched closed, plus there's one area that Dr. Webber thinks may require a bit more. X-rays have confirmed there's also a broken bone, so once he's stitched up, she'll operate on it and likely have to put in a rod.

It's funny to me in a non-humorous way, of course, that the medical implements used on humans can be universally used on pets as well. They're smaller, of course, but the fact that technology has improved so much since veterinarian medicine first began means that an animal who would've been euthanized can now be saved and live out their little lives.

"Did she file charges?" I ask as I hand Dr. Webber the instrument she needs to begin debriding the wounds.

"She's doing that now while she waits to hear how CB is doing," she replies. "Need

some sterile gauze soaked in saline, there's some dirt embedded in this one."

Slowly but methodically, she treats each wound while I go behind her and stitch up the poor little guy. So much of his body had to be shaved that he resembles one of those half-starved, mange covered animals that some of the bigger pet advocacy groups show on their commercials to get donors.

"What about her? Was she hurt?" I question. I know if it were me, I would've jumped in and fought tooth and nail to save my pet. I know that some people believe they're just animals and to an extent, they're not wrong. But when you bring them into your home, feed and care for them and love them, they become more than that; they become a member of your family.

"She was and said once she knows Charlie Bear is gonna be okay, she'll go to her doctor. The girls up front helped clean her up and stop the bleeding until she can get there," Dr. Webber says.

Harrumphing, I snidely state, "I hope the cops file charges and if they don't, I hope she takes them to small claims court to recoup the financial burden."

Because this won't be cheap by the time it's all said and done. We'll be medically boarding Charlie Bear until his wounds are healed enough that the possibility of infection is over, then he'll have to be restricted to his crate while his leg continues to heal. It's definitely a clusterfuck.

This day has been never-ending and all I want is a long, hot soak in a tub full of bubbles plus a glass or two of wine. I wouldn't be opposed to having a few chunks of chocolate melting on my tongue while relaxing in the tub either. We had several other emergencies show up, which meant that I was handling wellness care, giving annual vaccinations, and clipping nails on our recalcitrant patients. Thankfully, the other vet tech in the clinic was able to come in on her day off to help, otherwise, I suspect we'd

still be there running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Tomorrow, though, because Dr. Webber also handles livestock care, I'm off while she heads to the farms, and I briefly wonder what I'll do with myself since it was unexpected. If I had been given more notice, I could've made arrangements with Katie's mom to keep Kimber, but the call came in too late. I don't want to abuse my friendship with Carly since Katie has several younger siblings and she's got her hands full enough without adding Kimber to the mix.

Sighing, I grab my purse then head to the school to pick up my girl. I decide that it's gonna be a pizza night so while I wait, I go online and place an order for pickup, noting that I'll pay when I get there. Thank goodness it's a small town, because I know that bigger cities prefer payment ahead of time, but Roanoke Pizzeria is locally owned and operated and they're very familiar with me since we ate a lot of pizza while I was in school. I'm actually impressed that I can even stomach it at this point.

My phone chimes and I look down then grin when I see it's a text from RiffRaff.

RiffRaff: How was your day?

Me: Long and tiring. How was yours?

RiffRaff: About the same. It was pretty out and with winter fast approaching, I went for a ride with some of the brothers. Would've been better if you were with me, your arms wrapped around my waist.

"God, this man," I murmur to myself, grinning. I absolutely love being on his bike, getting what he calls wind therapy. At first, I was nervous since I'd never been on a motorcycle, but he's been riding for decades and that feeling soon dissipated. Now, I'm like Kimber in that I find it a perfect mode of transportation.

Me: Probably for me as well.

RiffRaff: What made your day so long?

Me: Constant emergencies today. First one was a little dog who was attacked by another dog that was not on a leash.

RiffRaff: The dog okay?

Me: Well, he's got a lot less fur than he had yesterday, that's for sure, but he's all stitched up, has a cone of shame, plus a cast for his broken leg.

RiffRaff: What are you doing for dinner?

Me: Lol. I just ordered pizza from Roanoke Pizzeria. Will pick it up once I grab Kimber.

RiffRaff: How about I go pick it up and head in that direction?

Me: I haven't paid for it yet.

RiffRaff: Babe.

I snicker because any time he wants to get his point across that something I've said is somewhat ludicrous he just says, 'babe'. So, if he wants to pay, I won't object because he has some old-fashioned values despite the fact he's admitted that he was all but raised up in a male dominated environment. Yet, he's always a gentleman where I'm concerned.

Me: Okay, RiffRaff. I understand.

RiffRaff: See you two ladies shortly. Stay safe.

Me: You do the same.

I'm disappointed that he won't be on his bike since he has to get pizza, but it's probably for the best since the weather is so mercurial these days. I think snow is on the forecast and I want him safe. He's come to mean a lot to me, even though I'm not quite ready to examine my feelings too closely.

"I wish you could stay tonight," I murmur as he ends our kiss. "I need you so much." At his look I hurriedly continue. "Not just for that, but because it's been a rough day and I need to be held by my man."

"Maybe that's something you should talk to Kimber about, sweetheart," he suggests.

"Really? You don't think it's too soon? She only just met you a month or so ago," I reply.

"She's almost a teenager, Jilly. She knows what adults get up to when they're a couple," he rebuts.

Well, when he puts it like that, he makes a lot of sense. "Okay, I'll talk to her and see how she feels if her mom has sleepovers with her boyfriend."

"Ol' man. If you're my ol' lady, then I'm your ol' man. Explain to her it's more than just being boyfriend-girlfriend. In my world, it's more sacred than marriage."

I've read that in my romance books, of course, but hearing the conviction in his tone lets me know that at least that part of the club culture is accurate. I always take what I've read with a grain of salt because it's fiction. However, there's usually a little bit of truth behind that so I'll discuss it with my girl in the morning since she's already gone to bed and once she's asleep you don't want to wake her if you can help it. She gets growly and temperamental, it's like approaching a grizzly bear in hibernation,

you do so at your own risk. I still can't believe she's already a teenager and wonder how it is that time passes so quickly. Soon, she'll be headed off to either college or a trade school, leaving me rambling around my farmhouse.

"I'll talk to her, RiffRaff, I promise. Now, can we maybe take a little time for some adult talking?" I tease, moving toward the hall to my bedroom. "She sleeps like the dead, so she won't hear anything. It'll partially soothe me even though you won't be able to stay all night."

"I'll set my alarm and slip out before she wakes up, sweetheart. Why don't you go and take a bath and I'll lock up then meet you in bed."

"You sure do spoil me, handsome," I whisper, kissing the underside of his jaw.

"As long as I have breath in my body, I'll keep on doing so," he vows.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RiffRaff

We had church with both chapters a little bit ago, then most of us left except for Brick, Dragon, Wrecker, Butcher and Cuda. As I sit at the bar nursing a beer, I remember the dream I had where Wrecker told me I was going to be needed soon. Figuring that this must be why the others stayed behind, I decide to check it out to confirm my suspicions. So, I burst back into church and see the five of them sitting there, staring at me in utter disbelief. Church is sacred and I'm being somewhat disrespectful. However, I have a suspicion about what they're talking about and feel I need to be involved.

"Keep your britches on, boys." Looking over at Wrecker I say, "I'm ready. Let's put these guys out of their misery before they pop a blood vessel."

When the door flies open again, Selah comes rushing in with her laptop in hand, declaring, "I'm here." Then she narrows her eyes at Wrecker. "The next time you're going to talk to me in my damn head, give me some warning. I had just taken a sip of my coffee and nearly choked on it."

"Since when can you do that?" Butcher asks Wrecker.

Back when we first patched over to our former club, I would've said that things of the supernatural were nothing more than a fairytale. However, being healed by one brother from another chapter, and seeing several others turn into Reapers has completely changed my outlook. So, I wasn't shocked or surprised when Wrecker

met with me in my dreams and told me there was a mission for me to handle.

“His power is evolving,” Selah answers for him, shooting him a triumphant smile. “It goes hand in hand with his daywalking ability.”

“Great. That’s just what we need. Another brother who can probe our minds and invade our brain anytime he wishes,” Butcher sneers, shooting Dragon an accusatory look.

Dragon holds his hands up in the air in a defensive pose looking innocent and just as confused as everyone else. “How the hell am I blamed or responsible for his power spike? That shit’s not up to me and it’s not like I’ve trained him on how to do it.”

Brick blows out a heated breath looking perplexed before asking, “Can we get back to the matter at hand here? Y’all can duke this shit out later.”

I have to agree with my boy on this one because time is of the essence. Joceline is in danger and the longer we wait, the more perilous it becomes. The Cedar Creek brothers have gone through enough shit; they don’t need to lose a family member as well.

“In other words, one of you start telling me what’s been going on behind my back!” Dragon demands. I start to worry that the boy is going to burst a blood vessel if he isn’t answered soon.

I hold back my chuckle because his powerful voice is perfect for his position. I have one of those myself, which I rarely use these days since I no longer hold the gavel, but I can respect the authority behind his tone.

“Don’t blame me, I wanted to tell you right away. Blame him,” Butcher enlightens Dragon, leveling a finger toward Wrecker.

Dragon steeples his fingers, placing the points of his fingertips over his lips before glaring at the four jokesters. If looks could kill, they'd be nothing but four piles of burnt ashes at this point. Selah gulps and I watch as Butcher reaches over and places his hand on her leg, wanting that connection with Jillian and the club for myself. Selah lightly places her laptop on the table and gracefully takes her seat. Cuda looks like he's about to pass out and Wrecker is lounging against the backrest of his chair, acting like he doesn't have a care in the world.

The commentary starts off with Cuda telling Dragon and the rest of us about finding Joceline crying in her car, her face covered in bruises and lacerations. Wrecker then jumps into the discussion and tells us how he managed to put the pieces together and confronted Cuda on his suspicions. Butcher picks up the conversation, advising that when they were all in Harper's hospital room, he noticed something off between Cuda and Wrecker when the godmother announcement was made, he cornered him and persuaded him to tell him what that was.

"That's where I came in," Selah fesses up. "Butcher asked me to do a little digging on the slimeball and what I found isn't up to par with what he projects himself as being in the public eye."

"How so?" Brick asks.

"He has the persona of one who works in politics." I watch as the lightbulb comes on over my son's expression. Most politicians we've had dealings with are scum, saying one thing but doing another.

Selah turns her computer around and points out some photos she found online of him as he drives through town. "As you can see, he disguises himself as a family man. He says hi to everyone he passes on the street and kneels to play with all of the babies. What they don't know is that he's a con man, a predator of a different sort than that of the men we've been dealing with in the community."

“Can you explain that further?” Dragon asks, head slanted to the side. I can tell he’s assimilating the information he’s been given so far, trying to put all the pieces of this fucked-up puzzle together.

Blowing out a breath, Selah picks her explanation back up, saying, “He enjoys the chase. Married women are his repertoire. He likes the cloak and dagger as well as the potential of being caught. Ruining marriages means nothing to him, it’s an adrenaline rush for him.”

Sounds like he and my ol’ lady’s ex are cut from the same cloth, minus that fucker being in politics anyhow. I bite back a snicker at the thought since tensions are still running a bit high, not wanting to draw any attention to myself. I’m on an information gathering session of sorts so I can be prepared for what I’m going to face once I hit the streets of Cedar Creek.

“And my sister? He doesn’t give two shits if she finds out?” Dragon asks, clamping his eyes shut as he processes the hell his sister’s been going through.

Women are to be protected at all costs. That’s been part of my moral compass since I was old enough to string rational thoughts together. I think for some people, that piece is missing, because there are far too many men who willingly subject females to horrific shit. This fucker sounds like he needs to be permanently dealt with, that’s for fucking sure.

“Nope,” Selah answers, “he has her right where he wants her. He’s aware of what her family means to her and uses it against her to keep her where she is. She has a role to play, and he’ll accept nothing less.”

“They don’t share a bedroom anymore,” Cuda inserts.

I watch the myriad of expressions on the faces of several of the Cedar Creek brothers,

specifically Dragon and Butcher.

“And how the hell do you know that?” Dragon asks through gritted teeth as Butcher’s posture stiffens.

“We’re friends,” Cuda explains. “She keeps the house clean, cooks his dinners, goes to the office parties, but she refuses to sleep with him in any capacity.”

If he’s a cheater, I can’t say as I blame her one bit. I mean, there’s a lot of risks to fucking a lot of different people, and several of them can have dire consequences. He doesn’t sound like the kind of man who wraps his junk up, either, so it’s always possible he has a bunch of illegitimate kids running around. Granted, I’m not tossing that into the conversation at all, but I suspect it’s something that’s crossed at least a few of their minds.

“Can’t blame her on that one,” Brick slips in, shaking his head in disbelief. “What have you uncovered, Selah?”

When Selah answers, she does so confidently. “He has two P.O. Boxes in different towns. One in Cedar Creek, and one in Kemp. He doesn’t receive mail at either location, so I think he’s using them as a lock box of sorts. I have a man on the inside of the Kemp location, we’ve become buddies on the web, and he is going to take a look inside of them for me during his next shift. If by any chance it holds incriminating evidence, I’m going to have him snap pictures for me.”

“Would he be willing to remove the items and save them for us?” Butcher asks his woman, his eyes bouncing back and forth.

“That won’t be necessary,” I interject. “Once we have confirmation, I’ll be taking myself a road trip. I’ll dispose of any incriminating evidence I come across and then I’ll rescue Joceline and her children.”

“Why you?” Brick asks, looking uncomfortable. “You’re still recovering, you don’t need to be going on any solo missions.”

“I’m recovered just fine,” I retort. “Stop worrying so much, son, or you’ll put yourself in an early grave. I’m not going to relapse, and if I do, it won’t be anytime soon. Everyone has seen to that. I’m as fit as a fiddle.”

“He’s the only one who won’t be seen as suspicious since nobody knows his face,” Selah adds, justifying why this is the only route that makes sense. “Wrecker has found him a sponsor who’s going to act as if RiffRaff is a distant cousin who hasn’t visited the town.”

“We’ll be reconnecting,” I chuckle. “It’s been a while since I’ve had myself a vacation. I think I’ve earned myself one.”

While I hate that I’ll have to leave Jillian and Kimber for any length of time, once I explain that it’s club business and what that means, I suspect she’ll understand. Of course, I’m planning to call and text her as often as possible while I’m away, especially since it’s a long ass ride in a fucking cage. Just thinking about her has a small smile playing on my face. I can’t wait for her to meet my family.

Brick sighs when he realizes I won’t be heeding his worry and staying home. “You’re an honorary member, we can’t ask you to put yourself in danger. Those days are behind you,” Brick reminds me.

As if I need to remember that dark time in my life when I didn’t always know who the fuck I was. I’m still a patched member even though I’m no longer the president and it’s time my son remembers that little fact.

“You aren’t asking, I’m offering. Plus, the higher beings say this is the way it has to be,” I remark.

“I don’t like it,” Brick professes. “You need to take some back up with you. Someone needs to protect your six.”

“I have connections of my own,” I express. “I know a few old timers that wouldn't mind coming out of retirement. Wouldn't even blink their eyes if I were to ask them. And for fuck’s sake, stop acting like I’ve got one foot in the grave. I’m not that fucking old, and thanks to Angel, I’m in better health than I was before I lost my mind.”

“That's what we need,” Brick mumbles. “A bunch of bored men riding the streets and painting the town.”

“Sounds like a good time to me,” I tease. There’s nothing better than raising a little bit of hell from time to time.

“Not to interrupt here,” Dragon states. “But if you’re going, RiffRaff, I’d like to have a few of my contacts back you up.”

“Hell, yeah,” Butcher whoops. “Please tell me you’re calling in Marcum and Xavier LeBlanc.”

“Good call,” Wrecker replies, nodding his head in approval.

“Wait!” Brick shouts. “Aren’t these the two you warned us about not too long ago? I’m not sure they are the best men for this job.”

I’m actually looking forward to meeting the two men who take no prisoners when there’s an injustice they’re aware of, and when they find out it’s a woman and kids? I suspect heads are gonna roll.

“This is the only way I can guarantee that nothing will happen to your dad,” Dragon

advises. “They're a little off hinge, but nobody is as protective as they are when it comes to family and friends. And I have a feeling if anyone can stand up to them and have them toe the line, it'd be RiffRaff.”

“Or he'll join them, and we'll be bailing all three out of jail,” Butcher helpfully adds.

Pssh, as if I'd ever be caught, for fuck's sake! It's time to have a come to Jesus meeting with my son.

“Not helping,” Dragon hisses as he nails Butcher with a ‘shut the fuck up’ look.

“Look at Brick,” Butcher chuckles. “He looks like he's having a Jesus take the wheel moment.”

“Naw, that's his I'm about to shit a brick look,” Butcher helpfully adds. Brick shakes his head and walks out of the room.

“I guess he needs a minute,” I guffaw. “If things don't go his way, he puts himself in timeout.”

“Life around here is going to be fun,” Dragon huffs. “Nobody goes anywhere or makes any moves without my say-so. Got it?”

Everyone left in the room nods their heads as Dragon follows Brick out of the room. Shrugging, I get up to go find Brick. It's time for us to talk and for him to stop tiptoeing around my ass.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RiffRaff

“Brick, we need to talk,” I tell him as I walk over to the bar to where they’re sitting. “Let’s go into your office.”

“Pops, not in the mood right now.”

“I said, let’s head to your office, Brick ,” I order, pulling on my presidential voice that used to make grown men cower in fear.

“Fine, fine, whatthefuckever,” he grumbles, grabbing his beer and storming off toward his office. I get one from one of the prospects and follow behind, entering the office to see him pacing it, rubbing his hand across his shaved head.

Taking a sip of my beer, I place it on the desk then walk toward him until we’re toe to toe. “You see this?” I ask, pointing to my cut where my flash resides. Then I turn and smack my back patch which denotes my club and location. “And this?”

“Yeah, and?” he spits out.

“I’m still a fucking patched member, Mr. President ,” I snarl through gritted teeth. “And as such, while I may no longer hold the fucking gavel, and no, I don’t want it back, I’m entitled to be treated as such. I still hold the patch, I still ride, and I still go on fucking runs. You were completely disrespectful and totally out of line with how you treated me in church.”

A stunned look crosses his face, and he feels around for his chair before he slumps into it, his mouth hanging open. I watch, my arms across my chest, glowering at him, as he tries several times to talk. My brow raises and I ask, “What do you have to say for yourself? My cut doesn’t say ‘honorary’ on it, son. Fuck, we’ve never had that designation in my lifetime. I realize it was different when I wasn’t in my right mind, but I am and all the fucking scans those assholes did on me prove that fact. You know this, you were there when we went over the results, remember?”

“Fuck, Pops, I... I don’t know what to say here,” he finally manages to stammer out. “I mean, before you were healed, I was adjusting to the fact that you were probably not going to be around all that much longer, you know? In my head I know you’re perfectly fine, probably healthier and better than anyone else if I’m being completely honest. But in my heart, fuck Pops, my heart still sees you in the motorized wheelchair, not always knowing who you were, who I was, and failing fast.”

I’m stunned seeing how glassy his eyes look. I love my boy, always have, but this life can be hard and indifferent when it comes to emotions and feelings. We had to be tough and strong, especially when we did things that weren’t always legal under man made laws, knowing that we might not make it out of a particular situation with our lives intact.

“I know, Brick, I know.” I may not have been aware of it at the time, but when I questioned why most of the brothers were still treating me with kid gloves, Ryleigh talked to me and told me just how bad I really was at the time. I hold a lot of guilt, even though it wasn’t my fault, because I wasn’t always the nicest, most pleasant man to be around. In fact, I was grumpy, surly, and a downright asshole most of the time.

He stands and walks to where I’m still standing then wraps me up in a hug. It’s been a long time since I’ve hugged my boy outside of the typical side hugs most of the brothers give one another. I can feel his shoulders shaking and find tears welling in my own eyes. My son may be a strong man, but he’s been carrying the weight of the

world on his shoulders for a long time, especially since he didn't even have me to counsel him.

“Love you, boy,” I say, my voice gruff with unspoken emotion. “And I’m so fucking proud of how you’ve led this club all these years. You’d have made your grandfather proud, I think.”

He chuckles then sniffs a few times before pulling back and wiping his face. “Love you too, Pops, and I’m so fucking sorry for how I acted in church. But somehow, I doubt that my grandfather would be proud of the man and president I’ve become. The old man was a mean sonofabitch as I recall.”

“Yeah, he was, but he wasn’t always that way, not until Ryleigh was abducted then Bonzai and Lorelai were killed. He went from wanting to be a family-oriented club to not caring,” I reply.

“So, now that we’ve got that cleared up, anything you want to share?” he asks. I know what he wants to hear, and I’ve put it off long enough. It’s time I tell my boy all about the woman who’s enraptured me.

“I met a woman,” I admit. “She’s my ol’ lady, Brick, but it hasn’t been so long since I met her daughter, which is why I haven’t brought her around and introduced her just yet. She’s a civilian although I’m gonna want to bring it to the table when I get back from Cedar Creek and officially claim her as my ol’ lady.”

“What’s her name? And you said she has a daughter? How old is she?” Brick questions.

“Her name is Jillian, she’s a vet tech at the animal clinic which means she probably knows Ryleigh and Rory at least. Her daughter’s name is Kimber and she’s about to turn thirteen, right around Christmas.”

“Can’t wait to meet them,” he says.

“You’re gonna love them,” I promise.

While the prospects get my truck gassed up and make sure I’ve got an emergency winter kit since I’ll be heading through areas that have gotten a blanket of snow, I pack my duffel bag and make sure I’ve got my gun and plenty of ammo on hand. Not knowing what kind of situation I might find myself in once I meet up with the LeBlanc brothers, I want to be prepared for any and all outcomes. After giving the prospect my duffel bag to load for me and reminding him to make sure my bike is properly tied down on the bike trailer, I head toward where Dragon and Wrecker are sitting. By the time I make it their way and sit down, one of the club girls has a beer placed in front of me.

“Thanks, Stormy,” I say, taking a long swallow.

“No problem, RiffRaff,” she cordially replies before heading back behind the bar.

Usually, the prospects man it, but Stormy fills in whenever they’ve got other tasks to complete. Right now, I know that Ryleigh and Rory are in the kitchen putting together a cooler of drinks, sandwiches, and snacks for me to munch on during my trip. It’s gonna take a little over sixteen hours, depending on the driving conditions, before I hit Cedar Creek, and it’s a pain in the ass to go through drive-thrus when you’re driving a dually with a travel trailer hitched to the rear end. Hopefully, they remember a thermos of coffee as well to help me stay warm for the colder climates I’ll be traveling through. I make a mental note to ask if they’ve done so once I’m done talking to Dragon and Wrecker.

“So, I heard from Marcum. They’ve got an Airbnb booked for y’all and once I have the address, I’ll send you a text with the coordinates,” Dragon says.

Nodding, I ask, “Do you think I’ll need to call in any of my buddies for reinforcement?”

Dragon and Wrecker exchange ironical looks then Dragon tells me, “They’re nomads and definitely used to handling a lot of tough shit. I’m sure if more guys are needed, they’ll call on their brothers with the Deviant Knights MC, since that’s whose colors they ride under these days.”

“What are their road names?” I query. “Because I’m pretty sure they don’t ride as Marcum and Xavier if they’ve laid down the nomadic lifestyle and have started a club chapter themselves.”

Wrecker snickers then replies, “Marcum is Kodiak and Xavier is Conan.”

“Got it. So, we’ve got eyes on Joceline and her kids, correct?”

“We do. If all goes as planned, y’all should be able to get in, get them out, grab the felonious information that jackass has gathered on us and has spread throughout several post office boxes, and head back here without any issues. Of course, that fucker is a slimy weasel, so be prepared for anything,” Dragon advises.

“Always am, and I may reach out to Clatter to put him on notice. I may need him as backup in case we find ourselves in hot water since he now lives in Texas. I know the state’s big as fuck and I have no clue how far away he is from Cedar Creek,” I say. “He retired from the Raiders when I was indisposed. Best fucking brother I’ve ever had since we grew up together.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” Wrecker muses. “Just know that Kodiak will be taking point.”

“Got no problem with that, brother,” I reply. “I’m just a patch.”

“We’re hoping that if all goes well, we can form an alliance with them because Kodiak was mentioning they were looking to establish roots. Wouldn’t hurt to have them available if something comes up for either of our chapters.”

“Yeah, it’s always good to have friends available to reach out to in times of trouble. Anticipated or otherwise. Hell, if they become allies with us, I’m sure Brick won’t have a problem if they’re ever in our neck of the woods and need a place to crash, but that’ll be up to him, of course.”

One of the prospects comes over and after I nod at him, he hands me my key fob and says, “It’s all gassed up, the fluids are topped off, we’ve already put your bag in the back, have your bike loaded on the trailer and locked in tight. We just have to get the cooler from the ol’ ladies and then you’ll be set to go.”

“Appreciate it, prospect,” I tell him, slipping my fob into my cut. I won’t wear it while in the cage, of course, but it’s a habit at this point. There’s also a small key attached that I know fits the lock on the trailer.

He leaves and I ask, “Anything else you can think of that I need to know?”

“Not off the top of my head, brother. If anything comes up, I’ll reach out,” Dragon replies.

I stand and hit the table with my fist. “Then I’m off to make a quick stop before hitting the road. With any luck, we’ll have her and the kids home by Christmas.”

“Safe travels, brother. Keep the pavement beneath your feet and your bike sunny side up,” Wrecker remarks, something I’ve heard him say numerous times when one of the brothers goes on a run for the club. I knock knuckles with them before heading to the truck where the prospect is shutting the door after securing the cooler in the passenger seat. We nod heads at each other in passing before I jump in and fire up the

engine.

As I look around, I mentally go through my checklist to ensure I have all I'll need and don't see my thermos. "Shit, need that," I murmur, snapping my fingers. My thermos is one of those old school ones that keeps the contents hot for quite a few hours. I get out of the truck while leaving it running and am nearly to the clubhouse door when it opens and Ryleigh comes flying through, the thermos clutched in her arms.

"Oh, I'm so glad I caught you! I wanted to make sure it was fresh, so we brewed another pot and had to make sure it was ready to go for you, RiffRaff," she says.

I take it from her hands, lean down and kiss her cheek and say, "Thanks, Ryleigh. See y'all soon."

CHAPTER NINE

RiffRaff

I called Jilly once I was in the truck and found out she was almost home with Kimber, so I offered to grab food for an early dinner. I'm sure since I used the phrase 'we've gotta talk' that she's probably worried that I'm going to end it with her, but that is so far from the truth it's not even funny. After pulling into her driveway and parking the truck, I see the curtain move slightly and know either she or Kimber are watching.

Once I have the bags in my hand, I walk to the steps that lead to her porch, then can't help the grin that crosses my face when I see her standing in the open doorway. "Hey, sweetheart," I say as I make my way to her and lean down for a kiss.

"Oh, Kimber's going to be so happy," she says once I pull back. "She loves this chicken. And I am over the moon because I don't have to cook tonight, thanks to you."

"Glad I'm making your day easier, darlin'," I reply as I close the door behind us and follow her into the kitchen.

"I wasn't sure what you were getting so I didn't get out any plates yet. Kimber!" she hollers. "Come set the table, sweetie."

"Okay, Mom," she yells back, already flying down the stairs.

A brief spasm of pain hits me, wondering if when Ryleigh was a teenager she was

like this, all long legs and gawky angles. She's beginning to lose her childish appearance, which Jilly has lamented about a few times, but still has a wide-eyed wonder about her and I mentally vow to protect her from everything that goes bump in the night. Because my beautiful daughter-in-law wasn't protected, and neither was Kracken's Moira.

Granted, Ryleigh was still innocent and hadn't been assaulted like Moira was, but she was beyond naive about life and the world itself. I thought my boy was going to go crazy waiting for her to 'grow up' a little so she could decide what she wanted, because he was willing to claim her practically sight unseen once he was given the vision that she was foretold to be his.

"Hey, RiffRaff," Kimber says as she passes me and heads into the butler's pantry. "Paper plates okay tonight, Mom?"

"That works for me, no major cleanup then," Jilly teases. "I must've been good today or something, not having to cook dinner and no dishes. I best write this down in my journal."

I chuckle while Kimber giggles as Jilly pours iced tea for me and Kimber and water for herself. I've noticed that while she enjoys the occasional glass of wine or mixed drink, she mostly drinks water, which is probably why her skin is so soft and clear. Shrugging, I sit at the table when she motions for me to do so and grab the napkins to put at each of our places.

Our places.

Those two words resonate inside of me while Jilly and Kimber make their plates before I finally make mine. Not for the first time, I feel like I'm part of this tiny family and can't wait until the time I can make it even more permanent by asking Jilly to marry me.

“Soon,” my mind whispers.

“So, what’s going on that you called so early?” Jilly asks before taking a bite out of her biscuit. This particular restaurant uses honey butter when the biscuits are baking, and the flavors practically explode on my taste buds as I finish chewing the bite I just took so I can answer her.

“Gotta head out of town for a bit,” I reply.

“Is everything okay?” She looks puzzled but doesn’t ask a lot of questions, probably because I’ve told her if I do have to make an out-of-town trip, it’ll be due to a club run and I won’t be able to tell her anything outside of the basic facts.

It’s more for her protection than anything, even though we’re not into anything too illegal. On paper, we’re upstanding taxpayers, and despite the public’s common misconception about bikers, believing we’re nothing less than murderous outlaws, and while we frequently get stopped and sometimes hassled by cops when we’re out of our area, we’ve been lucky during those traffic stops because none of the brothers have ever been arrested. That’s not to say that there weren’t close calls before Brick got us fully out of the ‘dark ages’ as he calls them. Still, she can’t talk under duress about what she doesn’t know. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

“Yeah, club business, Jilly. I just hate that I won’t be around to help y’all decorate for Christmas since I promised I would take y’all to get a tree,” I admit. Plus, I’m going to miss being in her bed since Kimber was okay with me spending the night. Not just for the sex, which just keeps getting better and better each time we reach for each other, but because I enjoy being with her. It’s as simple as that. She makes me feel young and vigorous again. We have similar taste in tv shows, movies, and even books, although I won’t read a romance novel despite her constant begging. Still, she enjoys the occasional true crime story, which I prefer, so we’ve had some rather lively conversations.

“It’s okay, RiffRaff. You’ll see it when you come home,” Kimber says, drawing my attention to her.

“Let me give you Brick’s number, Jilly, in case anything comes up while I’m gone. I told him about y’all today, and he’s looking forward to meeting both of you.”

“Who’s Brick?” Kimber asks.

“My son. He’s married to a woman named Ryleigh and they have a little girl plus two cats,” I tell her.

“What’s the little girl’s name?” Kimber persists. “Oh, and the cats?”

I start chuckling at her enthusiasm which soon has Jilly joining me. “The baby’s name is Aubree, and the cats are Calvin and Hobbes.”

“Oh, I bet they’re cute!” Kimber squeals. “But not as cute as Chloe, of course.”

“My brother’s ol’ lady, Rory, has a cat too whose name is Sassy. When I’m back, I’ll take y’all to the clubhouse and introduce you around and you’ll probably see them on the huge cat tree the brothers built along one of the walls. They’ve all got air tags on them in case they slip outside, but for the most part, unless we’re having a huge family thing, they stay at their houses. Still, Brick won’t take down the cat tree because if all three are on it, he added a screen that comes down in front of it to ‘lock’ them in so to speak. They have everything they need but we don’t have to worry about them if a lot of others are roaming around.”

By this point, Kimber’s eyes are huge as she listens to me talk about the set up that my son put up for his ol’ lady’s cats. “That sounds awesome!” she exclaims. “I can’t wait to see it!”

“Well, we’ll have a huge dinner on Christmas so you’ll be seeing it then,” I promise, crossing my fingers that Dragon and Wrecker were right when they predicted that this will be a quick turnaround trip.

It doesn’t take long before we’re finished eating and Kimber quickly clears the table before she heads back upstairs to finish her homework. She shocks the hell out of me when she stops, throws her arms around me and gives me a hug before she says, “Be safe, RiffRaff. We’ll see you when you come home.” Then she flies up the stairs while I give Jilly wide eyes.

“I definitely wasn’t expecting anything like that,” I whisper against my woman’s lips.

“She really likes you, handsome,” she replies. “Plus, while she doesn’t know all the hidden details about her father’s accident, she does get anxious when it comes to long trips since he was on one when he was struck and killed, and his passenger was injured. I didn’t know initially, but after you and I talked, I did a little bit of investigating and she wasn’t killed, just badly injured. Kimber’s therapist says she’s got a form of PTSD because she’s worried that someone else she loves and cares about will be hurt the way her father was all those years ago.”

“I’m really sorry I’ve gotta go, Jilly. I’m gonna miss both of y’all so fucking much it already hurts. Plus, I hate breaking a promise,” I tell her, gazing into her beautiful eyes.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I’ll miss you as well, RiffRaff,” she softly whispers. “I’ve honestly never felt the way I do with you in my life.”

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Jilly, something this old man wasn’t expecting he’d do in this lifetime,” I admit. “When I get back home, I hope you’re ready for this to go into warp speed. But in the meantime, I have to head out so I can get a few hours of driving in before I find somewhere to crash for the night.”

I wince when I realize the words I used have her paling. “Not like that, babe. A place to sleep for a few hours is what I meant. I don’t know how the weather’s gonna be either and it’s roughly sixteen hours of driving straight through.”

“You should’ve just called and told me, RiffRaff, and not taken the time to come by. I’d have understood!” she says, her hands on her hips as she blows out a frustrated breath.

“If I did that, I would’ve gone longer before I was able to taste your sweet lips, sweetheart,” I tell her, leaning further into her and capturing her lips with my own.

Long minutes pass as I pour all of the things I’m feeling into the action, and by the time we pull apart, we’re both gasping and breathing hard, and my cock’s as hard as a railroad spike. Still, heading out with her taste on my lips and tongue makes it worth the discomfort to me.

“I’ll text you when I stop for the night, Jilly,” I vow. “And call when I get on the road tomorrow, okay?”

“You text or call whenever you want, handsome. If I’m tied up at work, I’ll take the time to let you know that, so you won’t worry.”

“I’d appreciate that,” I confess.

We make our way to the front porch where I thoroughly kiss her again and as I walk to the truck she calls out, “RiffRaff?” When I turn to look at her, she says, “I love you too. Come home to me, to us, as soon as you’re able.”

My emotions are so high right now, all I can do is give her a chin lift before turning and getting into the truck so I can start my trip. She waves until I can no longer see her, so I use my Bluetooth to send her a text.

Me: Be sure you lock up and set the alarm, Jilly.

Jilly: Already on it because I know you usually do the walk-through when you're here and figured you'd reach out. Be careful, handsome.

Me: I will.

I hit the 'go' button on the navigation system and soon, the robotic voice is leading me toward Texas and away from Virginia, thoughts of Jilly floating through my mind.

CHAPTER TEN

Jillian

“Do you think he’ll like this one?” Kimber asks as we peer up at the huge fir tree at the Christmas tree farm we’re at. We’ve come to this one every year since she was a little girl, and the family who own and operate it treat us as though we’re an extension of their huge tribe. “It’s awfully big, sweetie,” I cautiously say as I crane my neck back so I can see it in its entirety. “Remember it’ll be me lugging it into the house and then lifting it up once the stand is on its base.”

He wasn’t able to get too far the day before because he got caught in a nasty wintry storm somewhere in Tennessee, which means he might be gone a little longer than initially anticipated. Hopefully he’ll be able to make up some time today, but he told me he’d call me, and I let him know he could call me as late as he needed to since we were getting the tree today. Normally, I get it sooner in the holiday season, but it’s been busy as hell at work, so we had to wait.

“Can we call RiffRaff’s son and see if he can help?” Kimber asks.

“Sweetie, he gave me his number in case there’s an emergency and I don’t think you wanting the biggest tree in the lot is one of those,” I gently chide.

“It would look so pretty, Mom,” she wistfully replies. She’s right, it’d be gorgeous in my foyer or even in my living room. But it’s enormous and I’m not sure if I own enough ornaments and lights to fill it. Secretly, I do want it, but that logical side of me is insistent that I need to get a smaller one.

I shake my head knowing my daughter has already mentally decorated this tree to the hilt. Ever since she was a little girl, she's embraced the Christmas season with absolute abandon. I need to let RiffRaff know that by the time he gets home, my house will undergo a complete transformation as Santa's North Pole home comes to roost on my property. I already have a local handyman coming out to put up the outside lights for me since I refuse to use any ladder that requires me to lean it against a structure. Nuh-uh, not me! The most I'll use is a stepstool, which won't help me much when it comes to reaching the roof. Because Kimber's birthday is on Christmas Day, I've always gone all out with the decorating so that she knows that not only do we celebrate the season itself, but we also celebrate her as well.

"Maybe no one will get it this year and it'll still be here next year, Mom. Then, RiffRaff can help us with it!" Kimber exclaims.

"So, you see us together next year, hmm?" I ask, my heart racing in my chest as I wait for her response.

"Mom," she drawls out. "Really? I see him marrying you, which is a good thing because then it means I might get a little brother or sister someday."

"I'm not as young as I used to be, sweetie," I reply.

But the thought of having another baby, something I thought was lost to me, warms me to the core of my soul. Imagining how RiffRaff will be as I grow as big as a house has my face warming, because I remember how much pregnancy hormones impacted that area of my life.

"I heard somewhere that a woman had a baby, and she was over fifty or something like that!" Kimber rebuts.

I shudder at the thought of being that age and doing all the diapers, late-night

feedings, then running after a toddler when I've put in a full workday. Just the idea of it has me exhausted. There's a reason for youth to have babies and it has to do with aching body parts and the sincere desire to have uninterrupted sleep. Plus, RiffRaff's older than me by at least a decade, and I can't see him wanting to do that either. Hell, as it is, if we did go the distance and then had a baby or even two, they'd be younger than his grandkids. That'd make heads turn to hear Brick's kids calling ours 'aunt' or 'uncle'!

"How about we wait to see what happens?" I ask. "Now, about this year's Christmas tree, I think we should get a smaller one this time around."

"Then can we get two? You always say we should compromise. I think this is one of those times we should talk it out. We could put one in the front room so it can be seen as you pull up to the house, then the one back in the family room for the presents?" she asks.

Grinning, I reply, "Why not? I'm sure between the two of us we should be able to handle getting them hauled inside."

"Doesn't Mr. Cleary come today? Maybe he or one of his guys can help us get them inside, Mom. You know he's always asking you if you need him to help."

"I like the way you think, kiddo. Let's do this so we can grab some lunch before we go home. I suspect while the trees are acclimating, we're going to need to go shopping for more lights and ornaments. Think of a theme for the one in the front room. We'll use the ones we've gotten over the years for the family tree."

She claps her hands and exclaims, "That sounds perfect to me, Mom! Can I call Katie and see if she can come with us then maybe spend the night? We could make cookies and watch Christmas movies."

“That’s fine with me.”

It’ll keep me busy since RiffRaff is out of town. It’s only the first full day and I know he’s still driving, but goodness, I miss him so much it’s ridiculous.

We had to go back for a third tree when Kimber saw the motorcycle ornaments at the Christmas warehouse we went to so we could stock up on tree decorations. She said that since RiffRaff is part of the family now, he should be represented. The front room tree is done in old timey ornaments; trucks, sparkly farm animals, berries and the like, with plaid ribbon falling down the sides from a huge bow on the top. RiffRaff’s tree, which is actually one we’ll plant in the spring, is perched on the front porch and is decked out with various motorcycles and bike-themed ornaments, along with handmade Harley Davidson bows tied on the branches. The family room tree looks like Christmas vomited on it with all the sparkly balls, as well as the unique ornaments that I’ve gotten Kimber over the years, plus the handmade ones she made during arts and crafts then brought home from school when she was younger.

But the piece de resistance is the inflatable Santa riding a motorcycle that sits out front. At this point, my budget is completely out the window, but I couldn’t help myself, especially since my girl was so insistent about letting RiffRaff know that we want him in our lives.

Thankfully, after a whirlwind day, that wrapped up with freshly made cookies, popcorn, and movies, the girls are now up in Kimber’s room, giggling their heads off because of their sugar highs. I’ve set the alarm and locked all the doors plus windows, and I’m soaking in a much-needed hot bath, drinking a glass of wine. Okay, I might have the bottle in here with me but who’s keeping score?

My phone rings and I answer it, grateful for the waterproof case that’s on the tub tray in front of me. “Hey, handsome, how’s the trip going?” I ask once the call connects.

“Hey, Jilly, miss me yet?” he teases.

I shiver because his voice is rough and gravelly which always gets my engine revving. “Definitely, especially since I hauled Kimber and Katie all over creation today, then we decorated three trees before we baked cookies.”

“Trees? As in more than one?” he questions, his tone on the humorous side.

“Um, yeah. We compromised,” I reply, giggling. Maybe I should stop sipping my wine because I sound like my daughter and her best friend right now. “You’ll see them soon. Were you able to get back on the road today?” I ask.

He sighs and I can hear the growling frustration in his voice when he says, “Not until a few hours ago, so instead of getting there later tonight, it’s gonna be some time midday tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, RiffRaff. This time of the year is unbelievably hard to travel with the crazy weather we get in the South.”

“It’s okay, Jilly. So, y’all made cookies today, huh? Did you save any for me?” he asks, changing the conversation to a more light-hearted one.

“I’ll have to make more,” I warn. “I honestly wish I had the metabolism that Kimber and Katie both have, that’s for sure.”

“Nothing wrong with the way you look from where I’m standing, sweetheart. I like the outer package a fuckuva lot.”

“You’re such a charmer,” I tease.

“Naw, babe, just a biker who tells it like it is.”

I manage to get out of the tub without disconnecting us which I consider a minor miracle and carry on with my nighttime routine while we talk. Carrying my wine and the bottle into my bedroom, I get comfortable in bed and let out a little sigh.

“I still have to finish up my shopping, plus decide what to get Kimber for her birthday,” I muse. “It’s hard, though, because with her birthday being on Christmas Day itself, I don’t want to go too crazy, but she deserves to celebrate that as well. Not just that but plan a party for the following week with her friends.”

“I knew it was around Christmas,” he acknowledges. “Guess I better get to shopping too, although I may call Ryleigh and have her help me with that since I’m out of town. She’d probably be more in tune with what a teenage girl would like.”

I snicker at the thought of my burly biker walking through a department store and into the teen section. He’d stick out like a sore thumb. “You don’t have to, RiffRaff.”

“Do I strike you as the type of man who does things he doesn’t wanna do?” he asks.

“No, not really.”

I yawn then clap my hand over my mouth, embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” I murmur.

“Sweetheart, don’t apologize because you’re tired. From the sound of it you were going non-stop all day long. I need to hit the hay myself so I can get up and out of here early in the morning. Love you, Jilly.”

“I love you too,” I reply. “Good night, RiffRaff. Be safe tomorrow.”

“I will, babe. Sweet dreams.”

He disconnects before he hears me whisper, “They will be as long as you’re in them.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RiffRaff

“Fucking finally,” I grumble as I pull into the driveway of the Airbnb I’ll be staying at for the foreseeable future. It was a long, tedious drive here as I navigated my way through icy roads. People don’t know how to drive during these conditions, and it shows as I swerved to miss a few accidents along my route. I’m tired, grumpy as fuck, and feel like I’m gonna come out of my skin since I’ve been in the cage for nearly three days now. I may not be ready to be put out to pasture yet, but my body says otherwise as I get out and stretch to get all the kinks out. I see two bikes parked on the other side of the driveway and my mood lifts knowing I’ll be able to get on my girl during this trip and not be confined during my time in Texas to a cage.

At least until we get Joceline and her kids, Wyatt and Willow that is, since I’ll need the truck to transport the three of them back to Virginia. Grabbing my cut, I slip it on then get my duffel bag from the backseat. The cooler is already empty since it took an extra day to get here, and I’ve already cleaned out the thermos. The bag of trash from my stops along the way here goes into the bin by the garage door as I head to the porch where a huge behemoth of a man is waiting.

“Kodiak?” I ask as I approach.

He nods then says, “RiffRaff, I presume.”

“None other,” I reply. When I reach him, we bump fists and he leads me inside, motioning me to drop my duffel bag which I willingly do. I then proceed to follow

him into what looks to be a sun porch where his brother, Conan is sitting, watching a game.

Conan stands and we fist bump before he asks, “You want a beer?”

“Fuck yeah,” I groan out as I practically fall into one of the cushy recliners. “I should be standing since I’ve been sitting on my ass for so fucking long, but damn, it feels good for a seat not to be moving, although my body feels as though it’s still going eighty miles an hour.”

Kodiak smirks and nods. “Yeah, does that to us too. Fucking weird feeling.”

Conan returns with three beers then hands them out before he sits once again. I pop the cap and take a long swallow, sighing in satisfaction as the cold brew slides down my throat. “Damn, that hits the spot.”

“Plenty more where that came from,” Conan says.

“So, I’m assuming you’ve got a tentative plan in place?” I question, looking at Kodiak.

“We’ve done some observing, and that fucking asshole she’s tied herself to is a motherfucking twig. I’m not sure how he’s threatening to anyone, I could snap him in half. But we did manage to catch him hitting up the post office in Seven Points today, and our inside man that Selah hooked us up with stated that he added something to his box. I find it odd that he’s not taking shit out as well, which means he’s not receiving mail there, he’s using it as a lockbox of sorts.”

“But we’re not here to raise the death toll in Cedar Creek, brother,” Conan reminds him but if the smile he has growing on his face is any indication, he’s not opposed to ridding the world of that cheating, abusive dipshit.

“We aren’t known for being subtle,” Kodiak growls.

“No, we’re known for demolishing towns before riding out of them,” Conan counters.

“But we’re not going to do that,” I state. “We’re here on a rescue and reconnaissance mission,” I relay.

“And to strip the P.O. Boxes of their information then scour his house in case there’s any more hidden documentation than what Joce has found,” Kodiak adds.

“We’ll take care of that, RiffRaff,” Conan says. “Need you to go to the post offices and grab that shit. Selah will tell her contacts who you are, so you won’t have any problems. Then, once we’ve got all the shit so we can blow his life up so to speak, you’ll get Joce and the kids and head home. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Good thing I’ve got my plain leather jacket with me since we can’t ride with our colors because we’re trying to fly under the radar,” I muse.

“I took the liberty of having skins made for our tanks too so that none of our emblems or personalized designs can be recognized or detailed in any affidavits. I don’t trust the ‘lawmen’ that’ve taken over Dragon’s house.”

“We learned a lesson the hard way once,” Conan advises. “Since then, when we’re doing something that requires us to do any sort of scouting, we use skins and disguises. We want to be as incognito as possible. We don’t want anything on us that is identifiable.”

“Well, that makes sense to me and I’m sure you’ve got more experience than I do. Although, I recall back in the day when we’d take our backup bikes on runs since they were customized as far as power goes but didn’t have any designs on the tanks that could identify us. We also didn’t fly our colors for the same reason. It was a pain

in the ass, but necessary back then,” I reply. “And yeah, Dragon and the rest of the brothers want to get home.”

“Heard the set up in Roanoke is pretty sweet, though,” Kodiak states.

“Yeah, since we had no clue how long it was gonna take to sort shit out, it made sense to add what we did to the property. We definitely have plenty of room now for anyone who visits.”

I hit seven towns today and went by each of the post offices to collect the things that prick was hiding. The men working with us have vowed that if anymore ‘mail’ was placed inside of these boxes they’d ship them to us. If the motherfucker Joceline is married to asks any questions on the whereabouts of the contents, they’ll state that there was a cleanout, and the shit was disposed of. Is it legal or legit? I have no clue, but the allies we have seem to know their shit better than we do and can word it to where it comes across as valid. Especially seeing as it’s legally supposed to be used for mailing services and not as a storage container. While we wait for our pizza to be delivered, the three of us are going through it, growing more and more disgusted with each thing we find.

“He’s a sick ass motherfucker,” Kodiak bellows, tossing his empty beer bottle against the wall.

What pisses me off is he’s got intel on every single brother from the Cedar Creek chapter, from any arrest records to financial details, as well as photos of them, their bikes, and their families. Not to mention, pictures of their clubhouse and personal houses. But what would put most of them away for life are the pictures and documents related to those fundamentalist bastards. We’re not letting that happen because those assholes deserved what they got for the hell they put the women they had in their ‘breeding’ program through. Moira, Kracken’s ol’ lady, still has a hard time when there are a lot of people around. Plus, Selah, Wrecker, and Mammoth were

born into that community and suffered as well.

Conan sighs but gets up and heads into the kitchen before returning with fresh beers for the three of us as well as the broom and dustpan. “Good thing you didn’t dent the fucking wall, brother,” he sneers once he’s disposed of the trash. “Because that would’ve cost us some fucking money.”

I shake my head and say, “Believe it or not, one of the things I learned to do as a teenager was repair then reskin a wall. If he had, I could’ve fixed it.”

“Sounds like you’re a jack-of-all-trades,” Conan teases.

“And a master of none,” I retort, smirking.

The pizza arrives, giving us a brief respite from the garbage we’ve been going through, and I wonder what Jilly’s doing today.

As we eat, Kodiak begins talking about the next phase of our plan now that we’ve got the bulk of the information from the post office boxes. Conan and Kodiak are going to reach out to Cuda to find out the asshole’s schedule today and tomorrow so they can go to the house and search it from top to bottom. Joceline doesn’t know them, but she knows their civilian names, so there shouldn’t be a problem with getting her to trust them. They’ll take my truck so they can get anything she wants to bring with her packed inside the trailer as well as in the back since my truck has a tonneau cover that locks. That way, she’ll have what she needs for the kids as well as herself. Not that her brothers Dragon and Butcher wouldn’t get her all new things if needed, but I’m sure there are toys and whatnot that the kids play with regularly.

They’re also going to get the originals of the documents that Joceline took photocopies of that she found locked away in the house. My job is to be ready to go as soon as he’s gone for most of the day so I can get the four of us as far away from

town as possible before he realizes she's grabbed her shit and is gone. I'm sure between our two chapters, one of the IT guys can create a paper trail that has her going in another direction for her safety. If not for the fact the asshole is loaded, they'd probably 'divorce' the couple. Dragon and Butcher are insistent that she get all his money since she's his beneficiary and as his wife, she would be first in line for his estate proceeds.

"I like it when a plan comes together," Conan finally says, rubbing his hands together.

"You sound like that asshole on that show, The A Team, " Kodiak retorts, grabbing another beer.

"Fucking good show," Conan says. "Where do you think I come up with some of the ideas I've had over the years?"

I chuckle when I hear him say that because while it was a fictional show, some of the shit they did was absolutely brilliant.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" Kodiak bellows, shooting Conan a glare that would incinerate him if Kodiak's eyes had lasers in them.

"Nope," Conan replies before shoving the last of his pizza crust in his mouth then grabbing another piece. "Relax, Kodiak, I still did my due diligence to make sure it was feasible."

"Who the fuck are you and what did you do with my brother? He doesn't use phrases like 'due diligence' for fuck's sake," Kodiak muses.

By now I'm laughing so hard I can feel tears streaming down my cheeks, especially since I've heard Brick, Banshee, and Kracken banter back and forth in the same

manner.

“Hey now, I may just look like another pretty face, but behind these good looks is a genius mind,” Conan rebuts, smirking at Kodiak.

“Y’all are killing me. I feel like I’m at home right now,” I admit as I use my bandana to wipe my face. “Brick and two of the brothers he’s closest to act the same way.”

“Alright, let’s focus. I’m sending Cuda a message to check with Joce to find out when that asshole will be gone for the majority of the day. I’d prefer it if he was gone for several days, but we’ll figure it out if we have to streamline things a bit,” Kodiak states. “That’ll give us a better timeline.”

I realize that because I’ll be getting back so close to Christmas, I won’t be able to shop, I’m gonna need some help from my daughter-in-law. However, she isn’t going to be able to help me with one thing I want to get for Jilly. Plus, I want to make sure she gets a stocking. I heard somewhere that most women don’t get one at Christmas because their partners don’t think about filling them, but my goal is to spoil my ol’ lady for the rest of our lives.

Finally finished, I look at the two of them and say, “Gonna hit the hay. Let me know what Cuda says in the morning.”

“Sleep well, brother,” they say in unison.

“Y’all do the same.”

Once I’m in my room, I grab a shower then relax on the bed, the television volume set on low to the local news so I can hear the weather report and call Jillian. After catching up on our respective day, she tells me she managed to get some of the things on Kimber’s Christmas list.

“Does she have a wish list?” I question.

“She does. Why?” she asks.

“Can you send me the link so I can do some shopping?”

“RiffRaff, you don’t have to do that, she won’t expect it,” Jilly says.

“Babe,” I rumble out.

I hear her huff which makes me smirk then she spits out, “Fine.”

“I didn’t expect you to give in so quickly,” I admit.

“You’re gonna do what you want to do regardless of whether or not I protest, so might as well just give you what you’re asking for. Just don’t go too crazy, RiffRaff, okay?”

“I’m not gonna make any promises, Jilly. Worst case scenario, some of it will be for her birthday and I’ll have the girls wrap them accordingly.”

“You’re not gonna wrap them?” she teases.

I laugh out loud because my wrapping jobs consist of handing over whatever I’ve bought in the bag from whatever store I purchased it from.

“Yeah, that’d be a no, sweetheart. I’m gonna let you get some sleep, Jilly. Love you.”

“I love you too, RiffRaff. Stay safe and we’ll see you soon.”

“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jillian

I'm smiling as the call ends. Going back through our conversation, I snicker at the fact that he hinted at how he uses brown paper bags to wrap gifts in, but it warms my heart that he wants to spoil my girl by having them wrapped by others. I love that he has us on his mind while he's out of town on club business. Hell, I just love him. I forward him the link to Kimber's wish list then put my phone on the charger after I make sure my alarm is set. Grabbing clean pajamas, I head into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face before turning in for the night.

Once I'm settled in bed, I turn the television to one of the forensic crime shows I watch for background noise and snuggle down to read until I fall asleep. I know that RiffRaff can't understand how I can watch shows that discuss violent events without batting an eye, but I don't like scary movies at all. I really don't have an answer for him; I think it has more to do with my curious nature than anything, because while I read mostly romance books, I also like reading true crime stories.

As sleep claims me, my mind wanders to the shopping list I still need to finish for Christmas. I plan to get RiffRaff a few things, of course, but also fill his stocking with useful items, like the deodorant I noticed that he uses, a beard grooming kit since he's got an awesome one and I want to help him keep it that way, plus a gift card to the small coffee shop he enjoys stopping at for their coffee and bakery items. Outside of that, I'll be driving to the Harley Davidson store and browsing around for inspiration.

Kimber's going to be a lot of fun to shop for this year. Even though her bathroom has a built-in vanity, I found a gorgeous one with natural lighting all around the mirror. There are multiple drawers for everything a teenage girl could possibly need, plus the thing that sold me completely—a place on the top that already has a thermal protectant for her curling and flat irons. She'll have clothes, of course, and even though she can't wear full makeup to school just yet, I'm okay with her applying earth tone eyeshadow, mascara, and lip gloss.

The last thing I remember is mentally going through the various designed wrapping paper I still have left over from last year.

I'm in the kitchen when there's a knock on the door. Kimber's already left for school, and I have an unexpected day off since Dr. Webber and the other vet tech are both down with the flu and the office is temporarily closed. I'll go by to check on our patients who are kenneled there, administer meds and replace IV fluids as needed, walk the dogs, scoop the cat boxes, and feed everyone, but we're not open to the general public today. I hate that, but both Dr. Webber and Cora are pretty sick. Tomorrow isn't looking good either, but I'll handle the day-to-day stuff until they're back on their feet.

"Coming," I holler out as I make my way to the front door. Glancing through the peephole, I see a woman in professional attire standing there, a woman that I don't recognize. I open the door and ask, "Can I help you?"

"Hello, are you Jillian Andrews?" she questions.

"Yes, I am, and you are?" I reply, feeling standoffish. It's not every day that a stranger shows up on your doorstep that isn't a salesperson, and it has me leery.

"Josephine Holley, but you can call me Jo. I'm with the Department of Family and Children Services. May I come in?" she asks.

“Sure, although I’m not understanding why you’re here.” I’ve never dealt with this department before, and I’m confused about why they’d be seeking me out.

I mean, while I have Kimber, there’s never been any sort of issue that would necessitate DFCS getting involved with our family. Curious, I lead her into my formal living room and see her glance around as she takes a seat in one of the chairs and places her satchel at her feet, before reaching inside and pulling out an envelope to hand to me.

“Please, read this and then I’ll answer any questions you might have,” she says.

With shaky hands, I reach over and take the envelope as I sit in another chair and glance at it, seeing my name scrawled in a female’s penmanship. “This is strange,” I murmur, opening it up and withdrawing several pieces of paper behind the actual letter. One says Last Will and Testament which has my interest piqued. However, I have the gut instinct that the letter will explain and give me better answers than reading the will itself.

Dear Jillian,

You don’t know me, and while I don’t know you personally, I know of you. I was the woman that your husband was involved with five years ago. After the accident that killed him, I found out I was pregnant with his child. I also found out that Duncan wasn’t single as he originally led me to believe. I swear to you that I had no idea you existed before I became involved with him. Being the other woman wasn’t something I was, or ever would be, comfortable being labeled as. Thankfully, the accident didn’t hurt the baby, and if not for the fact that I’m dying, I would’ve never reached out to you and hurt you in this way. Because once I found out that he was married and had a young daughter, I was ashamed. I didn’t know if you knew about his affair or me, but I wasn’t going to encroach on your grief, even though my baby is your daughter’s half-sibling. It’s a boy by the way, and I named him Callum Andrews, giving him his

father's last name.

He's a good boy, and very smart for his age. He starts kindergarten next year, but already knows his colors, how to count up to twenty (although he sometimes skips seven), can say the whole alphabet, and is already starting to read simple books by himself. He likes to do things all by himself, so he ties his own shoes, but sometimes they're on the wrong feet, and he enjoys motorcycles, cars, Legos, dinosaurs, and getting muddy. LOL.

You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all of this and it's because as I said above, I'm dying. Shortly after he was born, I found a lump on my breast, and I've fought for the past several years to beat breast cancer. Unfortunately, it metastasized, and I became terminal. If Mrs. Holley has given you this letter, it means that I've passed and right now, Callum is in foster care.

I know I don't have the right to ask this of you, especially since I was unintentionally involved in your husband's betrayal, but could you possibly find it in your heart to take my son in and make him part of your family? I know he's got an older sister, and you might not be willing to do that because in many ways, you'd be starting over again, but the thought that my sweet boy might end up bouncing around from home to home is the one thing that keeps me awake at night, especially as that's what happened to me, I want better for him, so I hope you'll be willing to do this for him. Not for me, because as I said, I'm ashamed and embarrassed about my involvement with Duncan.

He does have a small trust fund from me which should cover his education when he's old enough to decide what he wants to be, and I have a girl friend, Rebel, who has all of his personal belongings, as well as some mementos for him to remember me by. I'm enclosing a copy of my will, as well as the DNA paperwork to prove he's Duncan's son. I'm imploring you to help my boy. He's been the light of my life and one of the reasons I tried so hard to beat cancer.

Sincerely,

Amber Brown

My breath comes out in a rush of heated air. This boy, Callum, he's the true victim in this entire affair. I feel for him on such a deep level that I fight the tears that gather in my eyes. I can't imagine what it's like to lose your sole parent and be thrust into a house full of strangers. I quickly flip through the rest of the papers, briefly scan the will then take a longer perusal of the DNA test. Once I'm done, I look at Mrs. Holley and ask, "What do we need to do?"

Because there's absolutely no question in my mind whatsoever that he needs to come to live with me and Kimber. Yes, I'm going to have to have a very uncomfortable talk with my daughter, but she's old enough now I hope that she'll understand that things aren't always picture perfect and people have faults. Even though I have some unresolved issues with her father, she was the apple of his eye, and they had a solid relationship. Oh, she'll be mad about her dad, I'm sure, but she's always wanted a brother or sister, plus she's got a compassionate heart and won't take her sorrow out on this poor boy.

"You'll take him?" she asks. I see a look of relief cross her face as I nod. "I met Amber when she was given her terminal diagnosis and became Callum's caseworker. I've had a few other cases that were similar to what's happening here, but I'll be blunt. Most of them turned the children away."

My eyes widen as I reply, "How can they deny taking in a little kid, especially if they have kids? They're denying them their sibling, or siblings, as the case may be."

"Most don't want to be reminded that their men stepped out on them," she states. "You're a bit of an anomaly, Mrs. Andrews."

“Jillian or Jilly, if you prefer,” I tell her. “Because it sounds like we’re going to be in a relationship of our own while Callum adjusts. Does he know he has an older half-sister? How is he handling losing his mom? My heart breaks for him. Kimber was eight when her dad died, but this little guy never got to even meet his father.”

I know I’m babbling, but I’m kind of in shock and wish that RiffRaff was here right now to help me navigate my way through this rollercoaster of emotions.

“He knows he has a sister, he’s understandably devastated with his mom’s death, and the foster family he’s staying with has him in therapy to help him cope with all the changes. He doesn’t know about his mother’s wishes yet, simply because I wasn’t sure how you would react.”

“Understandable. So, what are the next steps, Jo?”

“I need to do a home visit, check out your house and make sure all is in order, then I’ll go and talk to him. Y’all will need to meet so he learns to trust you and get comfortable enough with you in order to come home with you. He needs to wrap his head around the fact that while you’re a virtual stranger to him, you’re still family. The only one he has left. You’ll get regular visits from me, some will be scheduled while others won’t be, and once we ensure that this will be a good fit for him, you’ll be able to petition the state to adopt him.”

“Then let me show you around since you’re already here,” I reply, glad that for the most part, the house is in good shape. It’s lived in, of course, but both Kimber and I thrive in an organized environment.

“Lead the way,” she says, smiling at me. She’s got a notebook and pen in her hand as we start going through the house.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jillian

“Holy smokes,” I murmur. “This is happening so fast. I need to talk to Kimber after school, and let RiffRaff know what’s going on as well since I’m meeting Callum for the first time tomorrow at the DFCS office.”

Right now, however, I’m taking care of the animals and talking out loud. I have my own notepad and pen shoved in the lab coat I wear over my scrubs whenever I’m at work. While I’m in a regular T-shirt and jeans today, the coat pockets hold what I need to take care of each animal, so I don’t have to go back and forth.

Taking out my phone, I call RiffRaff, because this is something he needs to know. He’s explained what being his ol’ lady means, of course, but when he left, I had one kid and now it appears I’ll have two, with the second one not quite five yet.

“Hey, Jilly,” he says when the call connects. “What’s going on, sweetheart?”

I shake my head because I haven’t said a word, but he somehow knows there’s something up. Maybe it’s because we usually text during the day and talk on the phone at night. “What makes you ask that, handsome?” I tease. “Is it because I’m calling hours before I normally do?”

“Yeah, babe, it is. Not that I don’t always wanna talk to you because it’s something I look forward to every night, but to hear from you in the middle of the morning tells me there’s something wrong.”

Quickly, I tell him about the social worker's unexpected visit, Callum, and that I'm going to be meeting him the next day. I wrap up with, "And I'm worried about how Kimber's going to take it, to be honest."

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair, which has it sticking up every which way at this point because it's not the first time I've done it since Jo left my home. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a scrunchie and do what I can to fix it, ending up with a messy ponytail bun creation on the top of my head.

"Callum, huh?" he muses. "Wonder if he likes fishing. I mean, it's not as easy this time of year, of course, but it's possible. He probably hasn't had much male interaction if his mom was sick that long." I blanch because that was not a topic I anticipated him talking about. But then, a smile spreads across my cheeks because this man always seems to amaze me.

"You're a good man, RiffRaff," I whisper, tears clogging my throat. "I was so worried you'd throw your hands up and decide me being your ol' lady was too much," I admit.

"Babe. Listen to me, Jilly," he demands when I go silent. "Being my ol' lady isn't a temporary thing, it's a forever situation. I ain't running anywhere and to be honest, I'm kind of excited to help you raise this little guy. I know we haven't talked about our future beyond that, but I was hoping to move in with y'all since my cabin on the property isn't big enough and you've created a beautiful home."

"Really? I... I may have already ordered the matching wardrobe for the bedroom suite for your clothes," I reply. "Because I was going to ask if you'd move in. I know you have to go to the clubhouse for meetings and stuff, but I want you there all the time. Is that okay?"

His robust chuckle soon has me giggling, especially when he murmurs, "Sounds like

we're on the same wavelength after all."

"Yeah, I guess we are," I reply.

"Now, you're not going alone tomorrow," he advises. "I'll reach out to Brick so he and Ryleigh can come. This little boy needs to know he's still got a strong family unit standing behind him."

Tears are now streaming vicariously down my face at his words, as I attempt to inject Moby with his antibiotic. I blink a few times to find the black cat glaring at me since I'm still scruffing him. "Sorry, Moby," I whisper before I finish my task and toss the used syringe in the sharps container.

"You at the clinic, babe?" he asks. I can hear his fingers tapping away and know he's sending a text to Brick. A man I haven't met yet who is my man's son. Warmth fills me at how RiffRaff is taking care of me, even though he's states away.

"Yes, Dr. Webber and Cora are both down with the flu, so the clinic is closed. I'm just here to give out meds, walk the dogs, scoop the litter boxes, then feed everyone. Probably have to do the same thing tomorrow as well, plus Kimber and I will have to return later tonight after dinner for the next round of shots."

"Babe, I can get Brick to have a prospect come and help. Y'all shouldn't be there alone after dark."

"Whatever you think is best, RiffRaff. Oh, God. I have to find out from Jo what Callum wants for Christmas, too!"

"Once you find that out, I'll get Ryleigh to help. Rory too, most likely. Hell, all the women since they all like to shop. Christmastime is like an addiction to them, and the stores are their drug of choice. Don't worry, whatever that little guy needs, we'll

make sure he gets, okay, Jilly?”

And just like that, my racing heart settles. “Thank you, RiffRaff,” I tell him. “Right now, I feel like I’ve been tilted off my axis or something, you know?”

“Definitely understand that one. When we realized that Ryleigh was a club princess, it turned the whole club on its head, that’s for sure.”

I briefly wonder what he means then decide to ask once the dust settles from this particular bombshell we’re going through. I’m willing to embrace the MC lifestyle, but there are a lot of terms I don’t understand and ‘club princess’ is one of them. I can presume what it means but want clarity for my own peace of mind.

“Well, I’m gonna go so I can wrap this up and then eat lunch before it’s time to get Kimber and have a heart-to-heart conversation with her.”

“I’ll be waiting to hear from you tonight. Love you, Jilly Andrews. It’s all gonna work out just fine.”

“I love you too, handsome.”

“Kimber, there’s something I need to talk to you about,” I tell her once she’s settled in the car. Then think better of it. We can’t have this intense of a conversation in a moving vehicle. “But I don’t know how you’re going to take it, so we’ll wait until we get home. How much homework do you have?”

“None, Mom, we had a substitute today, so we focused on classwork. I’ll probably read the next chapter and do the questions ahead of schedule, so I don’t have to worry about that when the teacher comes back. Katie and I are hoping we can have a sleepover this weekend either at our house or hers so we can finish making some... things for Christmas.”

“We can talk about that too. What are you wanting for dinner? We need to eat kind of early because we have to go back to the clinic later to give everyone their medicine. Dr. Webber and Cora are both sick with the flu and we have a few patients who are being medically boarded.”

“Do we have the stuff for stir fry?” she asks.

I think about the contents of the freezer and fridge and shake my head. “Nope. Let’s hit the grocery store because I think we need stuff to make some snickerdoodles.”

“Yes! And I found this recipe for something called sour cream cookies.”

“I have a little brother?” she whispers, her lips quivering.

Her face is pale, and I can see the immense hurt in her eyes that her father wasn’t the man she thought he was. I hate that he’s fallen from the pedestal she put him on as a little girl, but those were the choices he made. My job as her mom is to protect her heart to the best of my ability and unfortunately this time, I was the bearer of bad news.

“Yeah, sweetie. He’s almost five years old now and his mom passed away. Since you two are half-siblings, there was no way I was going to say no. I hope you understand.”

“Will it hurt you seeing him because of what Daddy did?” she questions.

“I don’t think so, Kimber. I forgave him long ago even though at first, it killed me.”

I’ve always been honest with Kimber, even with tough subjects. Of course, I keep it age appropriate, but I’m a firm believer in answering a child’s questions to the best of my ability. There was so much I wasn’t taught or shown that I walked into the adult

world utterly clueless about so many things it's not even funny. So, when Kimber was born, I made the decision that I would teach her everything I thought she would need to know to become a productive member of society.

"Why didn't you tell me about Daddy before, Mom?" she softly asks, curling into my side. She grabs one of the warm cookies off the tray and starts eating it as she waits for me to respond.

"I think... well, because you were your daddy's little girl and loved him so much, I just couldn't do that to you. The problems we had were adult problems, not for a child to be burdened with, especially not when you were grieving him so much."

"I probably hurt you too when I would cry about missing him. I'm sorry, Mommy."

She throws her arms around me as she sobs while I murmur nonsensical stuff to calm her down. "You didn't hurt me, Kimber. If anything, my hurt was for you not because of you. I don't know if I could've moved past what he did to our marriage, to be honest, but you had a child/parent relationship with him and shouldn't feel bad that you spoke your mind back then. Not one bit, you hear me?"

"Do you... do you think you would've gotten a divorce?" she queries.

"I don't know, honey. We had talked about separating while we went for counseling, but if his affair had come out, I can't say I would've been willing to reconcile. Because what he did was disrespectful to me and to the vows we took when we got married. I deserved better than that, and just so you know, you will too when you're old enough to date."

She starts giggling and looks up at me from her position in my arms. She's all legs and arms right now, so her being in my lap is not the most comfortable place, but I wouldn't trade it for the world, especially right now.

“What’s so funny?”

“RiffRaff told me I couldn’t date until I was forty,” she says, still giggling.

“Forty, huh?” I briefly wonder when she started talking to him outside of when he’s at the house and ask her, “So, you’ve been chatting with him while he’s been gone?”

“Yeah, but it’s secret Christmas stuff right now, Mom. I had sent him a text asking him what he likes so I could buy him something with my own money. Then, out of the blue, when I was telling him about a new boy in school, he told me that there’d be no dating until I was forty. Then he said that he’d be sure to let my dates know that he and my big brother, as well as all my uncles carried and knew how to hide a body so it would never be found,” she replies as her eyes light up with giddiness. Having men of their caliber in her corner is a new and excitable thing for her.

I can’t help it, I burst out laughing because I can picture his fierce face as he tells Kimber what’s gonna happen. “I think I can get him to agree on sixteen, sweetie,” I tell her, brushing back the hair from her face.

“I love him for us, Mom. He makes our house feel more like home now. Not that it wasn’t home before, he just adds something special to it,” she quickly says.

“I’m glad because he’s going to be moving in when he gets home since I’m his ol’ lady now. Let’s head over to the clinic and get that chore done, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I send a text to RiffRaff to let him know we’re heading to the clinic per his request, then gather my purse and keys before we head out the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jillian

“Hey, Jillian, I’m Brick and this is my wife and ol’ lady, Ryleigh,” the tall man who bears a striking resemblance to RiffRaff says once I’m out of the SUV and at the clinic door. “And you must be Kimber. My dad has a lot of good things to say about you.”

My daughter bounces on her feet as she blows into her hands. “I like him a lot,” Kimber replies. “Hurry up, Mom, it’s cold out here.”

I roll my eyes at her antics. She seems to be rolling with the punches pretty well.

Once we’re inside and the alarm is deactivated, I lock the front door and the three of them follow me back to the medical bay.

“Oh, look at that pretty kitty,” Ryleigh says, walking over to Moby’s cage. “Who’s the sweet boy?” she asks, her fingers through the bars as Moby starts purring. “You’re so handsome,” she tells him as his purrs get louder and more prominent. “Okay, Moby, I’m here to work.” Turning, she asks, “How can we help?”

Kimber, who’s used to helping already has Mr. Pibbles on a leash and is heading out to the back section where we take the dogs to do their business. He’s got a cone of shame on, but still needs containment since he had to have surgery to repair a broken femur. Since his owners had to go out of town for work, he’s boarding with us so we can keep him as still as possible.

“I’ll go with her,” Brick tells me as he follows behind Kimber.

Once they leave, I show Ryleigh what needs to be done and as she cleans the cages being used, I quickly give the animals their second doses of medication. Then, we scoop the two litter boxes before we start the feeding process just as Kimber and Brick bring Mr. Pibbles back in. The other dog, Grumbles, is still too fragile to take outside so he’s currently using pee pads in his kennel, which is one of the larger ones. Dr. Webber will decide when he’s stable enough to be walked, but for now, he’s safe.

“It’s well-lit out there,” Brick states, walking over and grabbing one of the water dishes.

“Yeah, Dr. Webber is big on security since one of us usually has to come back at night to check on any patients we might have. We only do medical boarding, thank goodness, and of course, any of our surgical animals usually stay overnight so we can monitor them for any signs of infection,” I reply.

With four of us, we’re soon done and as we leave the clinic, Brick stops me and says, “Ryleigh and I will meet you at DFCS tomorrow. You’re not alone any longer, Jillian.”

“Thank you both so much. I honestly can’t wait to meet the rest of the club,” I reply.

“When Rory heard where I was going, she wanted to come too,” Ryleigh confesses. “I told her once you got to meet all of us, I was sure you’d love the extra hands.”

“Many hands makes light the work,” Kimber states, grinning at them. “That’s what Mom says all the time.”

Brick shakes his head with a grin on his face as he peers over at Kimber. “She’s not wrong. Okay, ladies, y’all head on home. I know tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

“Mom, what if he doesn’t like us?” Kimber asks as we wait for Jo to call us back to the meeting room. I called the school early this morning and told the counselor what was going on and they excused her for the day so she could be here for the initial meeting with Callum. The four of us are sitting there and I know RiffRaff wishes he was here as he expressed that fact many times last night when we were discussing how this would happen on the phone. Truth be told, I kinda wish he was here as well. I’m obviously used to handling things on my own nowadays, but he gives me the strength I need as only a partner can do.

“He’ll like us, sweetie,” I reply, patting her thigh. “It’s gonna be just fine.”

From my lips to God’s ears, I think to myself.

Jo opens the door that goes to the back of the offices and motions for us. “Who are all of these people?” she questions once we’re standing by her.

“This is my daughter, Kimber, and my ol’ man’s son, Brick, and his wife, Ryleigh. They’re all family,” I reply. During her visit yesterday, I let her know that I was in a relationship and with whom and her eyes lit up because the club has a reputable reputation. They have a non-profit store in town that they open up around Christmastime to help not only the foster parents with gifts for the kids in their care, but also those in the community who need holiday assistance.

“So, Callum’s going to have family around him,” she says, sighing. I see her eyes get glassy then she clears her throat and attempts to get herself under control. “His foster mother has explained who you are, Jillian. I’ll leave it up to you to tell him who everyone else is, okay? I’ll be observing but won’t say anything unless necessary.”

We walk into the room where Callum is waiting with his foster mother and my heart flip flops when I see that he’s the male version of my sweet girl except for his hair color. She stands, smiles at me and leans down to tell him, “I’m just going to be

outside, okay? Mrs. Jo will stay in here with you.”

The sweetest voice I’ve ever heard says, “Okay.”

Kimber waits until the foster mom leaves then walks over to Callum, crouches on her knees so she’s at eye level and says, “Hey, Callum, I’m your big sister and I’m very glad to meet you.”

“Kimber,” he breathes out before smiling. “Who is ebrybody?”

I hide my smile at his pronunciation because I remember that phase from Kimber’s younger years. There were several sounds that gave her fits, so much so that for a bit, she saw a speech therapist to help. I make a mental note to see if he outgrows it since he’s still young enough to struggle somewhat.

She stands, takes his hand and walks over to me and says, “This is my mom. Her name is Jillian, but you can call her Jilly or even Mama J if you want. Then, she moves to where Brick is crouching down so he doesn’t scare Callum since he’s so tall and naturally intimidating with his shaved head and tattooed, muscular arms. “His name is Brick and he’s gonna be our big brother. His wife’s name is Ryleigh.”

Brick’s eyes are comically wide at Kimber’s pronouncement but to give him credit, he doesn’t bat an eye otherwise or refute her statement. It’s as if he’s aware of RiffRaff’s ultimate plan for us or something. “Hey, little man,” he says, gentling his booming voice as much as he can, I’m sure, although admittedly, it’s not much. He’s a big guy with a grumbly, growly sounding tone to his words. Still, his kindness and compassion shine through. “Do you like to fish by any chance? Because I can guarantee that once it warms up, my dad’s gonna wanna take you fishing on the docks like he did with me when I was a little boy.”

“I don’t know how,” Callum replies, his lips now trembling.

“It’s okay, we’ll teach you,” Brick promises.

Ryleigh and I crouch next to Callum, and I reach out and gently touch the spindly curls on his head, remembering when Kimber’s were all willy nilly like his are. “Callum, I’m so sorry about your mommy,” I tell him as he crumbles into my arms and silently cries. “Mrs. Jo says that you can come to live with me and Kimber, would you like that?”

Ryleigh is wiping away tears as she watches our interaction, then she wraps her arms around the both of us and whispers, “It’s okay to cry, little man. We shed tears for those we miss the most.”

“Yes, we do,” I add. “It’s always okay to express your feelings in our home, Callum. Just ask Kimber.”

Kimber giggles and joins our huddled group and says, “Trust me, I’m a teenage girl, and crying is sometimes a daily event. And when my daddy died, I cried a lot because I missed him so much.”

“Your daddy is in heaven too?” Callum innocently asks. His question brings home the fact that he’s too young to understand the connection between him and Kimber. He knows she’s his sister, however, how that relation is linked together hasn’t been digested in its entirety.

And... cue my own tears because it’s an unfortunate bond he shares with my daughter about their father, even though he’s still too young to grasp that fact.

“So, I hear you like motorcycles, Callum,” Brick says. “How would you feel about having a bed that’s shaped like one?”

Callum’s eyes light up and he nods his head, then his eyes dim. I’m sure his emotions

are all over the place right now, especially since death is a hard enough concept for adults to comprehend, let alone for those whose minds haven't matured yet. His whole little world has been destroyed and he understandably is having a hard time coping.

"But... but... if I live with you, Kimber, then Santa won't be able to find me. I already sent him a letter that I moved, what if it's too late to send another one?" he whispers. "What if Mama told him what I wanted, and he can't bring it?"

"We'll send him another letter and tell him where you are living now," Kimber promises. "I'll help you write it, okay?"

I'm so proud of her right now; she's always been kind and tenderhearted but she's showing a level of compassion toward her brother I wasn't honestly expecting.

"We will?" Callum asks. "And it'll make it to the North Pole in time?"

"Absolutely! I think I have his email address somewhere. There's an elf up there who prints off the letters for Santa to read. Oh! Wait until you meet my best friend, Katie. She has a little brother about your age, too! This is gonna be so much fun when you come to live with us," Kimber explains as if it's a done deal.

Well, technically, I suppose it is because Jo mentioned yesterday that she wants him settled in before the holidays and we've literally only got about a week to go. Depending on how well this meeting between us wraps up, the judge, according to Jo, stated that he'd be willing to sign the appropriate documentation even though he's out of the office for the holidays.

Jo comes over to us and says, "Callum, I'll get Mrs. Foster to pack up your belongings if you want to go home with Jilly and Kimber. Then I'll bring them to you along with pizza. You like fish on yours, right?"

I know she means anchovies and realize she's teasing him when I see his nose wrinkle in disgust. "No, ma'am, Mrs. Jo. I like pepperoni and cheese."

Jo winks at me then replies, "Then I'll make sure to leave the fish off, okay?" She then turns to me and says, "He's in a toddler car seat because he doesn't weigh enough for a booster seat quite yet. Can I get your keys so we can move it to your vehicle?" Then she leans over and whispers, "I spoke to Judge Johansson, and he is approving a fast-track adoption. By the time New Year's hits, y'all will be an official family."

"Thank you," I say, thinking that miracles truly do happen.

"Jilly, I'll handle it for you," Brick says, his voice full of authority as he holds out his hand for my key fob. "And if you give me your house key, I'll go and get the bed so the prospects can put it together while you do the paperwork or whatever's next here."

I mutely hand him my keys, completely stunned at how he's taking charge. I can see how much of RiffRaff is running through his veins since I've seen my ol' man in action a few times already. He's a take-charge kind of man and apparently, the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree.

Ryleigh claps her hands together and gleefully says, "Time to go shopping!"

"Yes, it is," I muse, my mind furiously spinning as I think about everything that has to be done. First, of course, Kimber needs to help him with his Santa list. I'll suggest doing that while we're driving home.

God, I wish RiffRaff was here.

Brick returns with my key fob then heads out the door, stating, "We'll be at the house

getting his room squared away.”

“Wait! You need the alarm code,” I advise as he and Ryleigh are at the door.

He turns and winks then says, “Pops already gave it to me.”

“Of course, he did,” I reply, giggling. He’s still taking care of me even though he’s so far away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RiffRaff

I'm grinning when I get off the phone with Jilly. Seems we've added to our little family today, and while she feels as though she's on a runaway train with everything that needs to be done before Christmas, I know my sweet daughter-in-law and the ol' ladies from both chapters are going to help her pull off some Christmas magic for Callum. I have my own to accomplish as well.

The ol' ladies have also been shopping for Joceline, Wyatt, and Willow since we're planning to leave in the next day or so. We've gotten every single piece of paper that scumbag had in the house, as well as several USB drives we're taking in case it alludes to any other nefarious dealings he might be involved with. Not that he's gonna be breathing much longer.

"Fuck, I'm glad this is almost done," Kodiak mutters. "I feel like I'm coated in a layer of shit thanks to that fucker."

"Same, brother, same," I reply.

"A little birdie says they saw you at the jewelry store in town," Conan says, pointing the neck of his beer bottle at me.

Kodiak snorts. "You're more like a big ass birdie, asshole. You saw him through the windows when we were in town."

Conan snickers while shrugging. “Okay, if you wanna be all technical and shit, it was me. So what? Care to share what you bought?”

I grin before pulling four distinct boxes from inside my cut and setting them on the table. Opening the first one, they see a locket necklace, which I got for Kimber. It has room for her to put two pictures inside. “This is for Kimber,” I tell them as they peer at the necklace. “No clue what pictures she’ll put inside, but that’s her job, not mine.”

I set it on the table then pull out a second one.

“This next one is something Kimber asked me to find,” I say, opening the long rectangular box. Inside are matching bracelets that have ‘BFFs forever’ stamped into them with gemstones surrounding the outside. “Then, I got this for the little boy I’ve yet to meet who is gonna be my son as soon as I can make it happen.”

“Fuck, I like that, brother,” Conan says. “You said the little guy is almost five, right? It should be right up his alley.”

Kodiak takes the leather band that has ‘Future IKMC prospect’ burned into it and grins. “Starting him out right, I see.”

“He’s a little behind the curveball,” I tease, snickering. “I mean, I have Brick ordering a miniature cut with his name on it and ‘Future Prospect’ on the back as well, but it may not get there before Christmas.”

“And what’s in that last box?” Conan muses, a smirk on his face.

Taking a deep breath I open it, only to see them both act like the huge diamond is blinding them. “Fuckers,” I state. “You had to know I was gonna ask her to marry me when I got home. Needed an engagement ring since I have Ryleigh and the other ol’ ladies doing the rest of my shopping with me being here.”

I honestly don't mind shopping and can't wait until next year when I can go with Jilly. I suspect she's gonna be the one who has to hold me back, because for so long, I never thought I'd have a second chance at a family of my own after Brick became a man and started one of his own that I may be going a little bit crazy. Hell, my debit card and credit card are definitely getting a workout since I kinda gave Ryleigh carte blanche. I make a mental note to delete the pictures she's sent of the things she's found for my girls and Callum, so Jilly doesn't see them.

Because as far as I'm concerned, I'm an open book with her, except for anything that's deemed to be 'club business' and we don't use our phones for that exchange. Sure, we have a group chat with all the brothers but that relates more to advising when we're having church, and that kind of shit, although Banshee regularly finds memes to share.

He's so different now since Ryleigh came back to us from the dead, and then finding his ol' lady. He's finally the man I know he was always meant to be, and I know if Bonzai and Lorelai were still alive, they'd be as proud of him as I am.

One of the things I hate that I won't be home for is working in the Christmas shop that the club maintains for the less fortunate. It's mostly for foster families to supplement the gifts for the kids in their care, but we also opened it up to those in our community who are struggling. Not only do we have toys and clothes, but we prepare boxes with the items needed, including either a turkey or a ham, for them to cook for their families. It's something I'm beyond proud of being involved with since Brick told Ryleigh she could get it going.

As a club, even when we wore the one percent patch many, many years ago, we still helped the townspeople. We just do more of it now that we're mostly legit. In fact, unless someone was fucking with the club in some way, we were always available to help our neighbors out, even if some of the time it was through anonymous donations. Not everyone likes that the club is in Roanoke, but we don't give a fuck. Most of us

grew up in the area so they're our people regardless of the fact that we're bikers.

Kodiak looks down at his phone then says, "Tomorrow's the day, RiffRaff. He's got a meeting just over the state line so that should give you plenty of time to get Joceline and the kids away and probably halfway home at least before he's aware they're gone."

"Better check my weather app to see what conditions I might be facing. Gonna go get gassed up as well, fill the cooler up and bring the ice back to put in the freezer until the morning," I reply.

"While y'all are on the road, Kodiak and I will stick around for the clean-up," Conan clarifies. "I'm sure with everything we've uncovered, he's deemed a threat to the club and needs to be taken out."

"I'm waiting on that confirmation from Dragon and Brick," Kodiak advises. "But if he's left unsupervised, there's no telling what kind of damage he'll do. I think the best bet is to eliminate him before he can start spreading his bullshit."

"For what he did to a club sister, he's definitely earned a death sentence," I growl out. "We protect what's ours, always."

"Damn straight!" Conan cheers. I suspect Kodiak's about to clock him in the head if he doesn't calm down based on the growl emanating from his mouth and his squinty eyes.

"Alright, I'm out to get this shit done. Gonna throw my dirty clothes in the wash as well. Need me to pick anything up while I'm out and about?" I ask.

"Nah, we're good, brother," Kodiak replies.

Standing, I gather my empty bottles, give the two brothers a chin lift then head to my room to start packing up my shit. Before leaving, I toss my laundry in the washing machine and get it started, then walk out the door. Since the weather has turned a bit, we already have my bike tied down in the trailer, plus it's loaded with things Joceline packed up on the sly to take back to Roanoke for her and the kids.

As I head to the store to grab drinks and snacks, I'm grateful that Cuda found out from Joceline what she and her kids enjoy so I can pick those up as well. Since it's a long trip, Kodiak already picked up two tablets so each of the kids have their own, then he downloaded several kid-friendly apps that are age appropriate and got them headphones, so Joceline and I don't have to listen to the warring sounds, while Conan found the kids travel pillows and blankets. It's my hope that we'll get most of the way home or at least, if we have to drive at night, they'll sleep. I'm grateful that I've got Sirius XM so that Joceline and I can find music we both like to listen to.

I honestly don't know how talkative she'll be; she's been through hell and back, but if she needs a listening ear, I'll do so. Anything to help ease her mind a bit until she's back with her family and safe.

"Call Jilly," I command through my hands-free button. When the call connects, I say, "Hey, sweetheart, guess who's heading home tomorrow?"

I hear her gasp before she replies, "I'm taking it you are? I sure hope so, you'll be home for Christmas!"

"Yeah, babe. Not sure what time I'll be hitting town, but I have to make a stop first, then I'll come and pick you and the kids up so we can head to the clubhouse. We usually do family Christmas once we've eaten dinner, so even if we end up getting there a little late, we won't miss everything."

"We'll wait to open our presents until you get home then," she replies.

“No, Jilly, that little boy needs to know Santa found him and he doesn’t need to wait until later that night. He’s had a lot of upheaval in his little life so let’s start off like we intend to continue,” I instruct.

“Yeah, that makes sense. Well, how about you and I wait until we’re back home?” she asks.

“I can get behind that one,” I tease. “Especially if there are any sexy teddies involved.”

She giggles then says, “Maybe there are and maybe there aren’t.”

“I sure miss the fuck out of you, babe,” I tell her. “So fucking much it hurts.”

“Same,” she whispers. “But you’ll be home in a few days. Oh! Guess what? Ryleigh asked me and Kimber to help out at the club’s community store the next two days since there are so many who needed help this year. I wish you could be here, though.”

“You’ll really enjoy it, I think, plus it might help Kimber realize just how blessed she is when she sees how so many people struggle just to put food on the table, much less gifts under a Christmas tree.”

“I agree. Katie’s coming with us as well,” she replies.

“Jilly, I’m running some errands to get ready to leave, so I’ll talk to you tonight, okay?” I ask.

“Okay, handsome. I love you. Please be safe and I’ll talk to you tonight.”

“Love you too, sweetheart. Later.”

I pull into the parking lot of the department store which looks like a warzone with all the last-minute shoppers. Right now, I'm grateful as fuck that Ryleigh and the rest of the ol' ladies took care of my shopping since I was gone because I would go bonkers if I had to do it myself even though I usually enjoy buying shit for other people.

By the time I'm done and standing in line, I'm even more grateful that I only had non-gift items to purchase. When I hear the woman in front of me let out a little cry, I tune in to the conversation only to hear that she doesn't have enough to make her purchase. Seeing that she's got gifts for a little one on the conveyor belt I say, "Here, let me get those for her," while handing my card to the clerk.

The woman turns to me and says, "You don't have to do that, sir." The desolate sound of her voice is what convinces me that, yeah, I do have to do this.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RiffRaff

“Ma’am, you’re buying presents for a little one, aren’t you?” I ask. At her nod, I state, “Then I’m gonna help. I know how much kids enjoy the magic of Christmas so since I’m able to, let me do this for you. Maybe one day, you can pay it forward and help someone who’s in the same boat you’re in today.”

Tears fall down her cheeks as she manages to squeeze between the carts and throws her arms around me. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she murmurs into my chest. “I’ve been sick for months and just went back to work so this is all I can get for my little girl. Still, I’m grateful for having a job and she’s young enough she’s not going to know any different.”

I manage to extricate myself from her arms, pull out my wallet and hand her several hundred-dollar bills. “Put this toward groceries or whatever else you might need.” My voice is gruff when it dawns on me that while I’m not home to help at the store, I’m able to help where I’m currently at right now. I make a mental note to let Dragon and his crew know that if they’d like to start a store like our house has once they reclaim Cedar Creek, I’ll help them fund the startup costs.

She clutches the money to her chest as she continues to cry. “Thank you for being a blessing to me and my daughter.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply as the clerk hands my card back to me then proceeds to bag up the woman’s purchases. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you and yours as well,” the woman replies.

It doesn't take much longer before I'm back in the truck and heading to the convenience store so I can gas up the truck and snag two bags of ice for the cooler. Sighing, I stretch as the pump continues to spin, grateful that in a few short days, I'll be in my woman's arms once again and surrounded by family and my brothers.

“Mama, it's so early,” Willow whines as I help Joceline carry the kids to the truck. I made sure it was warmed up before I came over because the temperatures have dropped a lot. “And it's still dark outside.”

“Shh, Willow, you'll wake up Wyatt,” Joceline replies. “You can just go back to sleep, sweetie, but we have to go now.”

Yeah, yeah, we do. Her fucking husband is supposed to be back home midday tomorrow and hopefully by then, I'll be close enough to Roanoke that if worse comes to worse, my brothers can be there to have our backs.

I gently place Wyatt in his carseat, get him buckled in, then place the pillow against the window in case his head slides over, and cover him with a blanket. Once Joceline has Willow settled, I help her into the truck, close her door then move to the driver's side and get in.

“Thank you for doing this for us,” Joceline quietly says.

“Always have my brothers' backs,” I reply, inputting ‘home’ into the GPS. I turn the volume down so the automated voice doesn't wake up the kids then say, “Let's head home.”

“Sounds like the best idea I've ever heard,” she advises while grinning at me.

She's a beautiful woman but I can see the shadows beneath her eyes and can only hope that once she's back in the fold of her family, she can heal so she can have her best life moving forward.

Well, once again the fucking weather slows us down. I had hoped we'd reach Roanoke by Christmas Eve but instead, it's now Christmas Day. Both kids have been steadily crying because they think they've missed Santa Claus coming and I've got the mother of all headaches pounding through my temples. Jilly and the kids are going to meet us at the clubhouse since the trip went longer than anticipated, which is fine with me. It's something we discussed last night when she was teasing me that because I wasn't home, Brick came over and put Kimber's vanity together, while Banshee and Jingles assembled the bike and superhero clubhouse that was purchased for Callum. She promised to take a lot of pictures and videos so I could watch them later, and I'm gonna hold her to that vow.

"I have it on good authority that Santa Claus knew y'all were coming to Roanoke with me, so he left your presents at your Uncle Butcher's house," I state, using my president voice.

"He did?" Willow asks, sniffing.

"Yeah, he did, sweetie," Joceline replies.

Both kids stop crying and look into the front seat at Joceline and ask, "Can we play on our tablets until we get there?"

Joceline shoots me a grin and nods. "Absolutely." She took them last night to charge and had them stuffed in her backpack/purse thing. She hands them over and then passes them their headphones.

Thank God , I think when silence once again reigns inside the cab of the truck. Soft

Christmas music is playing in the background but at least I can hear myself think.

“Here, RiffRaff,” Joceline says, holding out some Tylenol. “I know if I have a headache, you must have one as well. I’m so sorry for their behavior.”

I take the proffered pills, swallow them down with a gulp of water then reply, “They’re just little kids, Joce. I get that they’d be upset thinking that Santa missed them this year.”

Two hours later, we pull into the clubhouse. I help her get the kids out of the truck and head inside to see everyone in the process of sitting down to dinner.

Joceline makes her way over to her family while I scan the room for mine. Seeing Jilly looking at me, I quickly walk to her side, lean in and kiss her, then look at the little boy who’s staring at me with wide eyes. “Hey, Callum, I’m RiffRaff,” I say, holding out my hand.

“Are you gonna be my daddy?”

Jilly’s eyes get glassy, and I hear her sniff as I crouch down next to him. “Do you want me to be?” I ask.

He nods then says, “My daddy died so I don’t have one.”

“Then yes, I’d be proud to be your daddy, and Kimber’s too if she wants.”

Now Kimber’s silently crying, just like my woman as I pull out the ring box. Deciding now is as good a time as any since I’m already on my knees, I look at Jilly and state, “I never thought I’d get a second chance at love, especially when I got sick. But you renewed my faith in love, sweetheart. Will you marry me and let me adopt Callum and Kimber so we’re all one family, regardless of our origins?”

She wraps her arms around me, now sobbing out loud, but I still hear her whisper, “Yes, yes, I’ll marry you, RiffRaff. I love you so much.”

As cheers reverberate around the room, I stand after sliding the ring on her finger and announce, “I’d like to introduce y’all to my ol’ lady and fiancée, Jilly. She just agreed to be my wife. Now, let’s eat because we’ve got presents to unwrap!”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

RiffRaff, six months later

“Daddy, look!” Callum exclaims as his line moves.

“You’ve got one on your hook. Do you remember what I told you about reeling it in?” I ask.

“Yes, sir,” he says, his little tongue sticking out as he carefully starts bringing the line closer to where we’re sitting at the dock.

I settle behind him, ready to help anchor him and assist with bringing in the line if needed, but he’s doing very well all on his own. Better than the boys did when they were his age, that’s for sure. Once he’s done as much as he can and I see him straining to pull the fish out of the water, I reach over and place my hand over his and say, “Let me help, bud.”

“Okay, Daddy. Won’t Mommy be surprised?” he asks, glancing back at me.

I chuckle because my wife, as well as Kimber, have zero interest in fishing. We tried, several times, but caught absolutely nothing whatsoever because Kimber squealed every time a fish splashed in the water which chased them all away.

Instead, both of them are out shopping with the ol’ ladies for a club barbecue this afternoon while I spend time with my youngest boy.

He’s adjusted really well to all the changes, but we still have him going to therapy. Actually, we’re all still adapting to being a family of four. Jilly and I didn’t waste any

time going to the courthouse to get married, since I didn't care for a big wedding, and she said she'd already had one of those and was okay with using the Justice of the Peace.

Instead, we had a huge reception at the clubhouse and spent the day eating, drinking, and dancing, before Brick and Ryleigh kept the kids and I spirited my wife away for a few days.

"Wow, Callum, look at this one, it's definitely a keeper," I tell him as I look at the fish currently flopping around in the net I used to grab it with. It's at least a three-pound bass, which will filet and fry up quite nicely. I cut it off the line and put it in the cooler, then re-bait his hook. "Can you get a few more?"

"Yeah, I think I can," he replies, grinning at me.

I ruffle his hair and settle back next to him, as we sit there and wait for the next fish to bite.

This right here is everything I've ever wanted but never expected to have.

Family.

Brothers.

Love .

We continue fishing, adding several more to the cooler before I call it a day so we can get back to the clubhouse, I can get them cleaned and prepped for grilling, and Callum can take a bath because right now, he smells like he's been rolling around with the damn things.

"Let's go show your mom what we did, okay?" I ask as I pack up the rods and make

sure we didn't leave any trash lying around.

"Yes! I need something to eat too, I'm starving," he states, rubbing his belly.

I chuckle because like Brick was at that age, Callum has a hollow leg or something. He's put on a little bit of weight, which he needed, but hasn't hit a growth spurt just yet. I suspect it's gonna happen pretty soon, though, based on how much more he's been eating.

Jillian

"Don't forget, Callum really likes snickerdoodles," I say as Kimber starts pulling out the ingredients for cookies.

The other ol' ladies and I are currently making all the salads and sides we need for today's cookout. I've found over the past six months that these guys will celebrate pretty much anything at all. Today's celebration is because Ryleigh and Brick found out they're pregnant again.

RiffRaff just laughed and laughed then started whistling I'm My Own Grandpa while Brick glared at him. Because of our dynamics, I'm Brick's stepmother, but he's a big brother to both Kimber and Callum. Plus, RiffRaff and I are Aubree's grandparents, which makes Kimber and Callum her aunt and uncle respectively. It may be confusing to others, but it's my family and I love it. Every single chaotic moment of it.

"Me and Katie are gonna make them and also those sour cream cookies Dad likes."

She started calling RiffRaff 'Dad' about three months ago and he preened like a damn peacock, knowing what an honor it was for her to do so. She says it's because she didn't want Callum to be confused, but I suspect it's because her father's betrayal cut her deeply, but I haven't asked because if she wants to talk about it, she knows that

she can come to me without any judgment.

“What can I do next?” Cora questions, handing over the peeled potatoes to Rory.

She’s turned out to be a good friend and has been coming to the clubhouse whenever we have a family event. So has Dr. Webber, who insists we call her Collette when we’re not at work. I’ve noticed that whenever either woman is around, there are two single brothers who aren’t too far away, never straying from their sides and are always within eyesight of them whenever my friends are around, but as I told RiffRaff, I’m not gonna meddle.

Nope, not me. Now the other ol’ ladies on the other hand? Well, they just might. It’ll be fun regardless.

“Um, we need the baked beans opened and put in the aluminum pans so we can doctor them up a bit,” Rory says. “Kimber, did you see Chloe on the cat tree?”

Kimber giggles and nods. “She, Calvin, and Hobbes have become the three musketeers and I imagine Sassy looks at the three of them and their antics and wonders what she must’ve done in one of her other lives to deserve their treatment of her.”

At that, we all bust out laughing just as Callum and RiffRaff come through the back door.

“Mommy! We caught a bunch of fish! Daddy’s gonna clean them so we can fry them for dinner!” Callum exclaims.

I stop what I’m doing and lean down so I can hug him then wrinkle my nose. “Maybe while Daddy’s cleaning the fish you should take a bath, sweetie, because otherwise, your big brother might mistake you as a fish!”

He giggles as Kimber comes over and holds out her hand. “C’mon, stinky boy, let’s get you cleaned up then you can help me and Katie make cookies, okay?”

“Best day ever!” he shrieks.

He’s adjusted so well that now Jo comes by just to visit as she’s signed off his case months ago. Sadly, right now she’s mourning the loss of her husband, so she won’t be here today, even though I extended the invitation. They weren’t able to have children together which is one of the reasons she became a social worker, but I don’t want her to bury herself in work. There’s still a lot of life left to live as I’ve found out myself.

Actually, I just want all my friends to be happy if I’m being totally honest. Grinning, I go and wash my hands again and end up in RiffRaff’s arms.

“Did you have fun, handsome?” I ask, looking into his eyes.

“He’s a better fisherman than my girls, that’s for sure,” he teases. Leaning in, he kisses me thoroughly.

“Tease,” I murmur against his lips.

“You and me, tonight, our bed,” he replies.

“Good thing that Callum and Kimber are spending the night at Katie’s house then, huh?” I reply, grinning.

“Yeah, you won’t have to be quiet.”

I snicker at him before he releases me so I can keep going. The guys have a pig on the huge smoker in the back, plus there’ll be other meats for those who don’t like barbecue, and now, apparently, fish.

“Love you, Jilly,” he whispers in my ear.

“Love you, too, handsome,” I tell him, nipping at his chin. At his surprised look, I simply say, “Foreplay,” in the tone that the actress used in *The Cutting Edge* when she tells the guy ‘Toe pick’.

As I go back to the worktable and pull the vegetables over to start peeling them for a veggie tray, I send a prayer to the heavens thanking God for my beautiful life. It’s not always perfect, but it’s just right for me, my husband, and my two kids.

And maybe another one or two in a few years, my mind whispers.

The end... for now