



Savage (Demented Souls #15)

Author: *Melissa Stevens*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Savage had been eagerly anticipating a vacation – a trip with his brothers to escort the president home. It promised riding, drinking, and a lot of fun. Could life get any better for him?

Donna needed a break. She made a mistake and has been struggling to make things right for some time, but the situation has become dire. She has to make her escape immediately.

After successfully fleeing, she does whatever it takes, even resorting to sleeping on the streets, to put as much distance as possible between her and her pursuers. When a charming biker offers his assistance, can she trust him? His proposition seems too good to be true. However, if he can help her evade capture and prevent her ex from locating her, can she afford to turn him down?

With more at stake than just her own happiness, can Donna make herself trust her instincts or will guilt and second guessing cost her everything? Pick up your copy of *Savage* today to find out!

Total Pages (Source): 40

1

Savage pulled out of the parking lot, falling into line with the others, as they hit the road. He'd been looking forward to this trip for the last couple of weeks and now he was glad to finally hit the road. Was he looking forward to four days on the back of his bike? Yes and no. But he was looking forward to getting away from the Arizona heat, though that wouldn't be for a day or two.

They'd spent the last hour going over the plan for today, last minute changes and what to do if there was an accident or emergency. He'd shown up with a full cup of coffee, but it was long gone, and he wished he'd taken the time to get a second.

He yawned, then shook his head and forced himself to pay attention. He couldn't afford to doze off, not on a motorcycle on the interstate and especially not with the rest of the Demented Souls around him. The last thing any of them wanted to do was to wipe out and take out the rest of the pack. Not that the five of them was a huge pack, but they did have the prospects and the women behind them in the trucks. He didn't want to endanger them either.

If given a choice, Savage would probably have pulled out a couple hours later. He could have used a little more sleep, but he understood why Mac had insisted they get out early. Between the traffic here and what they'd have to go through in Phoenix, it was better to get through it early, before rush hour hit in either place.

It made sense, though Savage might not have thought about it until he was sitting in traffic, dying from the heat. Now he turned up the music on his headphones, and settled in. It would be a long day on the road, and most of it would be in constant

traffic, at least until they got north of Phoenix.

They made it to the interstate and settled into their typical road pattern, not side by side but staggered so that they had time to see what was coming and space to move out of the way if possible. Mac was the road captain for the trip, so he rode in front of the formation, using hand signals they'd all gone over more times than Savage could remember to convey changes and directions. For anything more complicated they all had Bluetooth radios in their helmets as well as in the cars. Maverick was riding sweep today. Savage wasn't sure if Mav would be there for the whole trip or if there would be others trading out with him, Savage was just glad it wasn't him. He didn't want the responsibility of the position. Especially as the newest fully patched member of the Souls.

Excitement bubbled through Savage as he settled into his place among the group, not that it was a long line of bikes, as there were only six along for this ride, plus the trucks, but still. He hadn't been on a long ride like this one since he'd joined the Souls. Not that he hadn't been on long rides. They'd been all over the state, through most of New Mexico and even into Texas a bit, but he'd never had the opportunity for a trip like this with them. Three weeks? Who even had the time to take a trip like that ever?

Not to mention that he'd never been to any of the states they'd be traveling through so that was a few more off his list of places to visit. He'd crossed off most of his international goals, and many places that he hadn't ever wanted to see, while he'd still been with the Navy. At the same time, he hadn't done as well for getting to see his own country, now though, he had more time and could do more of that, and with the men who had fast become his brothers too.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:03 am

2

Donna bent her head and carried a large stack of dishes from dinner back to the kitchen area where several women worked on washing them, along with the ones used to serve with. With one load dropped off, she went back to get another. She had to keep her head down, her eyes open and prepare for when she had a chance to escape.

In the meantime, she had to blend, to not call attention to herself, so that was what she would do.

“Sister Donna?” a voice startled her, making her jump and nearly drop the stack of plates she was carrying.

“Yes, sir?” She turned toward the man who’d called her name.

“Brother William said to send you over to the school building when you’re done in here,” Brother Jacob said, his gaze skimming down her body and back up again while he waited for a response.

“I’ll head over there presently. Thank you for letting me know.” She only glanced at his face before dropping her gaze again. She’d learned the hard way not to seem too forward, and meeting men’s gazes was seen as forward or aggressive. Now, she didn’t meet anyone’s gaze, doing her best to let them believe they’d beaten all the resistance out of her.

But she wasn’t beaten. No, she was planning her escape.

When she finished in the kitchen, Donna reported to the school building where the kids were all done for the day but that didn't mean the work was.

"You need to clean this place," Brother William instructed her. "Top to bottom, it needs to be done in time for classes to start again tomorrow. You know the consequences if you fail to meet my expectations. Do I have your understanding?"

"Yes, sir." Donna went to the closet where the cleaning products were kept, dug out what she needed to get started and went to work. Once William was gone, she got a good look around the place. It was a mess. It would take her a couple of hours to get it into good shape. But she would, because it was better than the beatings or worse that would happen if she failed.

And she would bide her time because she had to time her escape right. She had to behave long enough to lull them into thinking she was fully indoctrinated. She kept reminding herself she just had to wait. She was close, she knew it, but the time wasn't right. Not yet. But it was coming.

Soon.

Savage blinked his eyes open and bit back a groan. He wanted to roll over and go back to sleep but knew if he wanted to get food, and more importantly, caffeine, before they hit the road, he needed to get moving.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, sitting there for a moment as he blinked against the light streaming in the window across the room. The bed in between him and the door wasn't empty, not that he'd expected it to be. For the trip he and the only other single fully patched member on the trip were sharing a room, at least on the road. He didn't know for sure what was waiting for them at the ranch, but from what they'd packed in the way of gear it may be tents, and Savage had brought his own tent. Sleeping rough he didn't mind as long as he had access to showers and decent food. But if he was living in a tent, even if only for a little while, he wanted his own space.

Deciding he'd sat there long enough, Savage pushed himself to his feet, used the facilities and dressed, doing so as quietly as he could so he didn't disturb Sackett. He'd let the other man sleep as long as he could, at least until he was in danger of being late. Then Savage would check on him, if he hadn't seen him before then.

Stepping out of their shared room, Savage scanned the area. There had to be a diner of some kind nearby. Somewhere he could get food and coffee. If there wasn't a diner he'd take a convenience store. They usually had coffee, and even if that was undrinkable, which he had encountered before, he could grab an energy drink.

"What you looking for?" Mac asked as he stepped close to Savage and stopped.

“Somewhere to get food.”

“There’s a Denny’s about a block that way,” the road captain said with a jerk of his thumb back the way they’d come in. “And a mom and pop place about the same distance that way,” he indicated the opposite direction. “It depends on what you’re looking for and how long you want to take.”

“You already eat?” Savage asked, eyeing the cup in the older man’s hand.

Mac nodded. “Elyse had her heart set on the mom and pop. We just got back. The food’s great but the service is a little slow.” He checked his watch. “You probably have time, if you hurry.”

“Where’d you get that?” Savage nodded to the cup in the captain’s hand.

“There’s a gas station just down the block, the coffee’s decent and they had sandwiches, burritos and stuff. They looked good, and people were buying them so who knows,” the older man said with a shrug.

“Thanks. I better go get something before I run out of time.” He glanced at his bike and debated whether or not to take it down to the gas station. He could probably walk faster but it wouldn’t hurt to make sure he topped it off so they’d start the day with a full tank of gas.

Twenty minutes later he walked his bike back into line with the others and killed the engine. He sat there a moment wondering where would be best to eat, when the door to the room he shared with Sackett opened. Good his roommate was up. He could use the table in there to eat, then pack the last of his shit before they hit the road again.

“Morning, where’d you get that?” Sackett asked as he stepped in the door.

Savage told him as he sat and pulled the burrito from the bag the cashier had put his things in. He unwrapped it and closed his eyes at the burst of flavor. This was perfect. Just what he'd needed and between it and the coffee, would get him started on the road.

This would be their third day on the road and if Mac was right, not that Savage doubted him, their last full day on the road. They could push through and get to the ranch tonight, but if they were going to be sleeping in tents, it was better to spend the night somewhere else and arrive earlier in the day, so they had plenty of time to set up camp and get things situated while there was plenty of light.

When he'd finished eating, Savage gathered the last of his things from the room. He was carrying them, and the extra drinks he'd gotten from the gas station out to his bike. He packed away his stuff, but pulled out the small lunch box cooler he kept in one saddle bag, put the energy drinks and a couple bottles of water inside and went in search of the ice machine. One of the advantages of living in the desert was adapting to ways to keep drinks cold. He'd debated leaving the cooler behind, but now was glad he'd kept it. By the time he'd finished icing down the drinks and packing the cooler back in the saddle bags, the others were starting to gather. He made sure everything was secure then went to join them.

Donna hadn't dared to hope it would happen this soon. She sat in the car, watching out the window and keeping her expression blank as she watched the landscape speed by. They headed into Fort Collins with a load of home canned foods, jellies, honey and specials the others had called it, to sell at the farmer's market. She didn't know if she'd have a chance to slip away, but she would keep her eyes open and use every opportunity that might come her way.

She didn't know if she would manage to get away today, but she would do what she could. The hardest part was waiting. But she knew she needed to get away soon. She had to protect her secret and soon she wouldn't be able to.

Arriving at the farmer's market, Donna followed directions, setting up the stall, helping unload the foodstuffs and setting up the display. She was careful to show no life, no sign she might be thinking for herself. She couldn't let them know she was going to slip away as soon as she got a chance.

She had noticed there was a bus stop just down the street. If she got lucky, she could get there and get a bus out of town. The farther away she could get, fast, the harder it would be for the brothers to find her.

After everything was set up, she worked at the booth for a while, selling the items, taking cash, and making change.

"Sister Donna. We're all set here for a while," Sister Maggie said with a kind smile. "Why don't you wander around and see what all is being sold. Maybe you can come

up with some new ideas of things we can make to sell.”

Donna’s heart leapt. But she had to keep her expression from showing it.

“All right. Anything in particular I should look for? Are we just looking at food stuffs or are we open to other craft items?”

“Oh, good idea. Look at things that have been sewn, knitted, that kind of thing. It’s something the women of the commune can do to add to our income. I’m glad I chose you today.” Sister Maggie patted her shoulder then waved her off to wander the market for a while.

Donna strolled through the market, forcing herself to take her time and look at what each stall was offering. She made it to the end of the row and turned the corner, on the next row of stalls she continued to stroll along the stalls, taking time to pause and take a closer look at wares. She used that as an opportunity to check behind her to make sure no one from the commune was following her. After stopping several times to look more closely at the different stalls, and check behind, Donna felt as certain as she could be that she wasn’t being followed. When she reached the end of that row, she turned as if she was finished at the market and headed for the parking lot.

Act naturally, she reminded herself. There was too much at stake. If she acted as if she belonged here, she knew where she was going then fewer people would notice her.

As she made her way across the parking lot, she pulled the kerchief from her hair and quickly unpinned and unbraided her hair. It was the easiest and fastest way to change her appearance. Next, she looked down at the button up shirt and ankle length skirt she wore and quickly tugged the shirt from the waistband, unbuttoning the bottom few buttons and tying the ends instead. She wished she had a way to change the color or maybe get into pants instead of the skirt, but the small changes would have to do.

She hoped.

When she made it to the bus stop, she looked around, hoping to find information about when the next bus would be through. She saw nothing but there was a bus approaching.

Relief and hope washed through her.

After the third full day on the back of his bike, Savage was sore and tired. He wanted to get clean then unwind a bit. When they stopped for the night, he got the key to his room, then looked at Sackett.

“What are your plans?” Savage asked.

“I don’t know. I thought I might cruise around a little. Take a look at the town. I want to find something to eat, but other than that I don’t have any plans. You?”

“I’m going to shower first. I’ve got to get rid of some of this dust. Then I’ll find something to eat, I’m not real picky about that, but I want to find a drink.”

Sackett lifted one brow. “I take it you don’t mean water?”

“No,” Savage said with a scoff. “I need something a little stronger tonight. I’m not sure what I’ll end up with, but I’ll find somewhere to get a drink.”

“Let me know if you want someone to drink with. Or if you find a place with a pool table and are up for a game or two.”

Savage nodded. He watched as his friend turned and went back to the row where they’d parked their bike, the SUV the women had been using on one end and the truck the prospects had driven on the other. After a moment, he realized he’d zoned out standing there watching where most of the bikes still sat lined up. He shook his head, trying to jar loose whatever he’d been thinking then headed for his room. A

shower would help.

Savage tipped back the bottle and took a long pull, then looked around the room. Not for the first time, he found it lacking. He hadn't wanted to go too far, because he didn't like to ride after he'd had more than a single drink, but this place was dim and dingy, more than the typical bar. And he didn't see a dart board, pool table or anything to distract a person. He guessed that the people who came here were into serious drinking, and while he didn't mind doing that occasionally, it wasn't what he was looking for tonight.

That was the real question. What was he looking for? Obviously not this. He finished his beer and set the empty on the counter before giving the bartender a nod and leaving.

He'd found a place only a couple of blocks from the motel, now he didn't feel like going back, not yet, though maybe when he was ready to go back, he'd find somewhere to pick up a sixpack and take it back. Maybe Sackett would be up for a couple of drinks. For now, he was going to check out the area on foot and see at least a little bit of the town, and in a state where he'd never been.

By the time he made it back to his room, it was maybe nine and he was tired. Three days on the back of a bike all day was more exhausting than you would realize. Because they only had a couple of hours left, tomorrow they weren't leaving until later, which was good. Savage needed to get some exercise in, though he wasn't sure the motel where they were staying had a gym.

With a shrug he let himself into the room he shared with Sackett. He'd figure it out.

"Hey, I take it you didn't find a pool table?" Sackett asked from where he lay back on one bed, wearing just his jeans. He had one arm tucked behind his head while the other hand held a remote aimed at the TV.

“Nah, all I found was a local drinking hole, didn’t even have darts. Anything change while I was gone?”

Sackett shook his head. “Not that I know of. You ready to crash? I can turn this off. I have a book if you’d rather quiet.”

Savage couldn’t help but smile at the reminder of how his roommate had gotten his nickname. “Nah, it’s fine. You want one of these?” He lifted the bag with the sixpack of longnecks.

“Sure.” Sackett pushed himself up, so he was more upright on the bed. “Bar must have been bad if you’d rather come back and drink here.”

Savage handed his brother one of the bottles, pulled a second for himself then put the rest in the dorm size fridge in the cabinet under the TV. He used one of his rings to pop the top off the bottle, tossing the lid in the trash and taking a long pull as he made his way to the single chair in the room. He unlaced his boots and toed them off before setting them aside, flexing his toes and closing his eyes at just how good that felt. He had his boots good and broke in, but sometimes getting out of them was the most amazing thing he could think of. Well, almost.

Standing, he stretched then picked up his bottle and carried it to his bed. “What you watching?”

“Nothing. I can’t find anything that catches my interest for more than a few minutes.” Sackett held the remote in his direction. “You want to try?”

Savage shook his head. “I don’t care that much, just thought you might have found something entertaining.”

“If you’re just looking for noise, I can put it on one of the news channels,” Sackett

offered.

“No thanks. I know enough about the horrific things happening all over the world. I want to enjoy this trip, so I’m swearing off the news for the whole thing. It will make it easier to enjoy my time away. I’ll have time to catch up on the latest atrocities when we get home.”

“I hadn’t put it in so many words, at least not consciously, but I feel the same way. So no news. Anything else sound entertaining?” He flipped the TV to the guide channel, and they listened to the local weather while they watched the current programming scroll across the bottom half of the screen.

They ended up listening to that for a while then putting it on a rerun of a basketball game, Savage didn’t really care about basketball, but it was easy enough to follow and distracting enough to keep him from staring at the ceiling wondering what could go wrong next.

He woke early the next morning, and unable to roll over and go back to sleep, he’d tried, he got up, pulled on a pair of sweats, and dug out his headphones. He would see if this place had a gym, and if not, he could at least get a run in.

Stepping out of the room, he shivered. It was colder outside than he’d been expecting. It had been months since it had been this cool in Tucson, even first thing in the morning. All the more reason for him to get moving and warm himself up.

A quick check in at the office confirmed what he’d feared, no gym. Well, that wasn’t entirely right there was one but when he checked it out their idea of a gym was two treadmills and an elliptical machine. He’d rather run outside. So he went back out, turned on the music on his phone, adjusted his headset and set out.

He’d gone three miles and was working his way back toward the hotel when he

spotted what looked like a bundle of rags huddled on a bench. He hated seeing the homeless out like this, he hated that they didn't have somewhere warm to sleep, a shelter to keep the rain off, but he was one person, what could he do?

Savage continued running, keeping an eye on the bundle of rags, as he got closer, he noticed it was a woman, young, innocent looking but different from most of the homeless he'd encountered. Not that there was a huge number of them around here but still, there was something different about her. As she stood and stretched, as if working out some of the stiffness of sleep, he noticed she wasn't wearing the multiple layers of clothing that most were.

She seemed to be dressed in a simple long sleeve blouse and ankle length skirt, not even a jacket. That made him take a closer look at her face. She looked tired but not in the same way that he'd come to expect from what he'd originally taken her as. With no jacket last night, she had to have frozen. Well, maybe not literally, it wasn't that cold, but it was too cold to sleep comfortably without more than what she wore.

Savage shook his head and continued running. A check of his watch said he hadn't gone quite as far as he wanted so he circled the block. On his second trip, he noticed the girl who'd been laying on the bench looking around as if she was afraid she was being watched. That made him pause. As he approached, he slowed, then turned off his music as he stopped.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice you. Are you okay?" Savage said, pulling one headphone from his ear so he could hear better.

"I—I don't know." Her eyes went wide, and she looked like she would run off at any minute. "Where did you come from?"

One corner of Savage's mouth quirked. "Well, just now I went around the block but before that I was coming from back that way." He jerked his thumb in the direction

he'd come from. "But the motel where we spent the night last night is about a block and a half that way." He motioned to the road in front of him.

"Motel? You're not from around here?" her voice trembled, and her gaze flicked around them again. She used one shaking hand to move a strand of hair hanging in her face and tuck it behind her ear.

"No." He kept his voice gentle and tried to keep from making any sudden moves so as not to frighten her, but he glanced around too, wondering if she was seeing something or if she was just looking for it. "We're just passing through, we came in last night, we'll continue north in a few hours."

"We?"

"Yeah, me and some brothers, a few others." He didn't want to tell her that it was his brother's wives, she didn't need that much information. "We're going to visit another brother, then we'll head home."

"Where's home?" The longer they talked the less frightened she seemed. Had she thought he was with whoever she was watching for?

"Arizona. How about you, are you from Casper?"

She glanced around again as she shook her head. "I came in last night on the bus, then realized I didn't have enough money for somewhere to stay. I barely had enough to get something to eat." She glanced around again. "I wanted to get farther, but I guess this will have to do. Do you happen to know where a shelter is?"

The idea of this woman, a woman who seemed so fresh and innocent going to a shelter, or even needing a shelter, made him ache to hit someone.

“I have no idea. Like I said, I’m just passing through.” He hesitated, wondered what the others would say then thought to hell with it and said what he was thinking anyway. “We’re leaving town in a couple hours like I said, but you could come with me. We’re not going too far, at least for now, and if you decide you’d rather find a shelter, I’ll help you find one. Now or later. We’ll be headed south in a couple of weeks. You can come with us to Arizona, or we can find somewhere you’ll feel safe.” He hurried to get the words out, sensing that there was some reason she seemed so nervous. He wanted to help her. He needed to make sure she was safe.

Savage didn’t question that instinct. He’d long ago learned to trust it. Now, he had to figure out how.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:03 am

6

D onna studied the man standing in sweats and running shoes and nothing else from the looks of it. Well, other than tattoos. That alone let her know he wasn't here looking for her specifically. The group she'd fled was very outspoken about tattoos, and not in a complementary manner.

He was coated with sweat, but looked at her, his eyes filled with concern. Could she trust him? Her gut said yes, but she'd trusted herself before and look at where that had gotten her.

Sleeping on the streets, looking over her shoulder and having to rely on someone else for her next meal. But had she made that decision with what seemed right or had she trusted her instinct? She couldn't be sure.

"You said we. Who's we?" She narrowed her eyes as she watched him.

"Me and some of my brothers. Well, my brothers and their wives," he amended. "Look, if nothing else, let me take you for some food. You said you had enough money for food last night, but not enough for somewhere to stay. Let me at least get you some breakfast."

She stared at him a moment, then knew she had to have something to eat so she agreed.

"Okay. Where were you planning to eat?" She let her gaze roll down his body, hoping he got the hint that he wasn't dressed for a restaurant.

“Crap,” he said, scrubbing one hand over his face. “Come on back to the motel with me. I’ll grab a quick shower and get dressed then we can get some food. Maybe some of the women will be around and you’ll feel a little safer around them. I promise I’m not going to hurt you.” He held out one hand, motioning for her to join him as he walked in the direction he’d been coming from.

“You said you’re here with your family. How many of you are there?” She glanced at him when he was quiet for a moment, and found his eyes rolled back toward the top of his skull and his head nodding as if he was counting.

“Fourteen, including me, I think,” he finally said after a moment.

“Wow, fourteen and no kids with you?”

“No, the ones with kids stayed behind.”

She frowned. “If there are fourteen, and not all of your family is here, then how many siblings do you have?”

The stranger chuckled. “They’re not my siblings, they’re my brothers.”

Donna stopped. The men of the group she’d just escaped had called each other brother. The women were sisters. Was she walking back into another situation like what she’d just gotten away from?

It took him a couple of steps to realize she wasn’t with him. He stopped and looked back the hurried back to her side.

“What is it? Are you all right?” The concerned look on his face would be hard to fake but still, she had to know.

“Ho—How can they be brothers but not siblings?” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

The stranger tilted his head and watched her for a moment as if trying to figure out what she was thinking or what might be wrong with her.

“I think of them as brothers of choice. You can be blood with anyone but what matters is the ones who look out for you, who treat you like they care. We’re an MC. They’re my brothers.”

She must have looked confused because he continued.

“Motorcycle club. I’m part of a motorcycle club.” He looked at her like he wasn’t sure what else she could be thinking but he hadn’t been through what she had.

Relief washed through her. If he was part of a motorcycle club, then the group she’d just escaped from hadn’t sent him. They thought bikers were part of what they called the unholy and misguided. But weren’t bikers supposed to treat women horribly? She’d been through enough of that to last her a lifetime.

“I don’t know what’s going through your head, but it doesn’t look good. I can promise you we’re not what you probably think. We’re a little rough, but we don’t hurt women. If you come with me, you can meet us then decide. If after breakfast, you still want to find a shelter, I’ll help you find one.”

Donna stared at him for a moment, trying to decide what would be the best option. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she needed to eat and just because she was hungry wasn’t her only reason.

“All right. I’ll go for breakfast, then decide,” she said, straightened her back and resumed walking.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. I’m Savage by the way?”

“Savage?” Donna couldn’t help the way her voice squeaked, and only hoped he didn’t notice. Maybe this wasn’t her best decision after all. He winced. No, he’d definitely caught her squeak.

“It’s my last name. I got used to it when I was in the service.” He lifted one shoulder and let it drop. “Now it’s just normal to me.”

She continued walking, wondering if she should give him her name, she needed to tell him something, but should it be her real name or a fake one? The fake name would make it easier if she decided to go to a shelter here, but what if she decided to take him up on his offer to get farther away? Then it would become awkward.

“I’m Donna.” She wondered if she should offer her hand but decided he hadn’t so there was no reason she should. And now he had a name. Yes, it was her real name, but it was just her first name and Donna was common enough. Well, it used to be. It wasn’t so common for people her age as maybe for her mother’s age.

She wondered what her mother would think about her now? She used to think about her mother every day, but she’d lost her so long ago, and more recently, she’d struggled just to get through every day. Donna couldn’t remember the last time she’d thought about her mom.

“It’s nice to meet you, Donna. When we get to the motel, I’ll see if any of the women are around. We’ve got five along on the trip. I’m sure they’ll be happy to meet you.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything as they continued to walk.

“There’s the motel. We’re almost there.” His voice made her look ahead. There was a large chain motel about a quarter of a mile ahead of them. Good, she could keep

walking for a bit longer, but she was starting to get tired. That happened more often than it used to. She'd been working hard to hide it, but Savage wouldn't know any different. Still, she could make it to the motel without trouble. But it would be hard to get much farther without at least resting a bit. Even better if she could get something to eat soon.

Savage couldn't help but wonder about Donna's odd reactions. She was obviously scared of something, and he thought she was trying to get away from someone, but he had no clue why. He did what he could to reassure her, but between the dark circles under her eyes and her thin dress, he just wanted to make sure she was fed and warm. For some reason it was important to him that she was taken care of. He didn't understand it but trusted his instincts.

They made it back to the motel, he checked the row of motorcycles and found they were all still in place, none missing. That was good, it meant the women would be around and more than likely one or more would be willing to spend a little time with Donna.

"Come on, they've got free coffee in the lobby, let me see if any of the women are there," Savage said as they approached the building. Thankfully, the lobby had a large glass front, and he could see no one other than the clerk was there without going inside. He wasn't sure how they might take someone coming into the office without a shirt, and he didn't want to cause problems. "Nope, let me check with our VP first."

He led her to the door of Sadist's room and knocked. He heard movement on the other side, so he waited. He fought the desire to reach out and take Donna's hand. He barely knew her, and something told him she wouldn't be comfortable with it. Still, he thought a touch as innocent as that might help, but he held back. She needed to know him better first.

The door opened a few inches. Savage looked up to find Sadist standing in the

opening, wearing a pair of jeans that were zipped but the button open, and it appeared nothing else, glaring down at him.

“What?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I’ve got someone with me who needs some company for a few minutes while I shower and get dressed. I thought Beth might be willing, if she’s free.”

“Sorry, she’s busy.” Sadist’s gaze flicked from Savage to Donna then back again.
“Try Dumbass. Jailbait is probably closer to her age.”

“Will do. You know what room he’s in?”

The VP gave him a room number then closed the door. Savage heard the lock click into place and grinned as he shook his head.

“Come on. He’s right. Jailbait is closer to your age, though Beth’s not that much older.” He had no doubt what Beth was busy doing, not that he’d even tried to look past Sadist. He had more respect for the women of the club than that.

They made their way to the room Sadist had given them and repeated the procedure. He knocked, then waited.

“It will be okay, really.” He tried to sound reassuring. He didn’t have long to wait this time. When the door opened, Jailbait stood there, fully dressed except for shoes. Behind her, Savage could see Dumbass stretched out on the bed, looking comfortable.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” Dumbass called from where he lay.

“Not much. I’ve got a friend here,” Savage tipped his head toward Donna, “she could use a little company while I shower and dress. I thought Jailbait might be up for it?”

“How long?” Dumbass asked. “We’re planning to go eat soon.”

“Ten or fifteen minutes, tops. Then we plan to go eat too. Maybe we can go together?” He turned and looked at Donna, hoping the presence of the other couple would make her feel more comfortable. “We’ll talk about that after I shower.” He glanced back at Jailbait then to Donna, hoping she would get the hint that he didn’t think Donna would be comfortable in their room any more than in his.

“Give me just a sec.” Jailbait left the door open as she turned away, stepped into her shoes, then picked up a room key and shoved it into her bra before shoving her phone into the ass pocket of her shorts. “I’ll be back in a bit. You want some coffee from the office?” she asked Dumbass.

“I’m good.” He shook his head then reached over and smacked her ass. He only grinned when she put her hands on her hips and glared at him. She stepped closer, leaned forward, and kissed him then he turned his attention back to the TV while Jailbait turned back toward the door.

“Come on. Let’s go up to the office and get something to drink. You can help me come up with ways to torture him.” She tilted her head back toward the bed where Dumbass lay, a dopey, content look on his face.

Savage didn’t miss the way his friend pretended to watch TV, but his gaze was on the sway of his woman’s ass instead.

Savage shook his head and turned back to face Donna. Jailbait stepped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind her.

“Donna, this is Jailbait. Jailbait, this is Donna. I just met her, and I want to take her to breakfast but I need clothes first. I didn’t think she’d be comfortable in the room with Sackett and me, but I promise I won’t take long.”

“No problem. We got this.” Jailbait turned to Donna and held out her hand. “Nice to meet you. I was just going to the office for coffee, why don’t you come along, and we’ll find you something to drink too.”

He made sure they had his room number, then hurried off to get ready.

Donna wasn't sure about what she was doing but decided to go with it. Who had names like Jailbait and Dumbass? Not that she would ask. She had more manners than that.

"So, how did you meet Savage?" Jailbait asked as they walked along the sidewalk in front of the rooms back toward the office where she and Savage had been only a few minutes before.

"He just came up and started talking to me," Donna said, staring off into the distance. Standing still for the couple of minutes for each door to be opened had helped but her feet still ached, and she wanted to sit down. She wasn't sure if she should have coffee, but she'd missed it, and one cup couldn't hurt, could it?

"And he talked you into coming to the motel with him? I didn't think he moved that fast."

"It's not like that." She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to warm herself in the chill of the morning. "I," she hesitated and glanced around before continuing making sure there was no one around listening to them. "I'm new in town and don't know where anything is. I'd like to leave soon, but I ran out of money." She turned away, not wanting this pretty girl in short shorts and a tight tank top to see how ashamed she was of her situation.

"So he's going to get you breakfast and?" the other woman trailed off, leaving it for Donna to fill in.

“He said you guys are leaving in a couple of hours and I can go with him if I want.”

“Did he?” Jailbait lifted one brow as she opened the office door and motioned for Donna to go inside.

“He did. He said you’re only going a couple of hours from here, but that would be a couple hours farther away. If I want, he’ll help me find a shelter, or if I’m still around when you go back to Arizona, and I want, I can go with him.”

“And you think you might want to go to Arizona?” Jailbait followed her in then led her to a small area in a corner where a large coffee pot sat, along with a stack of cups and several cups with different coffee additives. She pulled one cup off the stack and handed it to Donna before lifting off a second and adding sugar and a couple of the little cups of half and half to hers.

“I don’t know. I like the idea of somewhere warm.”

As Jailbait moved a little farther down to fill her cup, Donna added sugar to her cup. It might not be the healthiest, but it was something and right now she needed what she could get. When it came her turn, Donna filled her cup with coffee, blew on it for a moment then took a sip. She couldn’t help herself as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the flavor. It had been so long since she’d had coffee, the commune had a vow against consuming any kind of drug, and they considered caffeine a drug.

“Are you from Wyoming?” Jailbait asked, as they made their way to the small seating area in the lobby. She sat and motioned for Donna to join her.

“No. I grew up in west Kansas. I wanted to get away, see the big city and learn about the world so I went to school in Denver.”

“Sounds nice,” Jailbait said with a slow nod. “But now you’re looking to get away

from?" again she trailed off, as if hoping Donna would continue and tell her what was going on.

Donna considered it. She could tell some of it. Maybe not all the details, there were some of them she never wanted to think about again. But she guessed she would have to tell someone and while Savage wouldn't eventually need to know most of it, she could tell this girl, at least some of it.

Donna took a deep breath, trying to decide how much to tell the other girl, the one who looked maybe eighteen but for some reason, maybe it was the way she carried herself, Donna thought she was older.

"I started school like any fresh faced eighteen-year-old. I was in the door, met new people, made friends." Donna kept her eyes on her cup while she talked, not wanting to see the judgement in Jailbait's eyes as she confessed how stupid she'd been. "Things were great. I knew what I wanted out of life. I knew what was right and wrong, or thought I did. I mean what kid that age doesn't think they already know it all?" She glanced up and met Jailbait's gaze for a moment, unable to help the self-deprecating smile that quirked her lips.

"We all do at that age, and there's little anyone can tell us that will make us think different. We have to learn the hard way." Jailbait's tone was kind, kinder than Donna thought she deserved, but she continued anyway.

"I learned. Anyway, in my junior year my new bestie came to me with this idea. She found a group of like-minded people who were forming a commune. Not entirely the hippie-dippy, free love kind of the 60s, but a serious community dedicated to living and working together to be self-sufficient. It seemed ideal, at least at the time." She looked back down at the cup she held cupped between her palms. The warmth seeping from the paper helped to warm her up after the cold night.

“I take it the commune wasn’t all it cracked up to be?”

Donna shook her head slowly, not looking up. “That’s one way to put it. We thought we’d done it all right. Investigated, went out and visited, made sure it was what it seemed to be before we dropped out of school, sold everything we didn’t need and moved out to the compound. Once we were there, though everything changed. Or it seemed to. I now know that what we saw before moving out to the compound was carefully screened, and designed to hide anything that didn’t make it look like an ideal situation.” She took a sip of the coffee and took a deep breath before she spoke again. “They hid a lot.”

She tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling as she tried to maintain her composure. She wasn’t going to tell the worst parts of it, but she hadn’t expected that telling this little part would be so emotional.

“Are you alright, sweetie?” Jailbait’s gentle voice brought her back to the present and reminded her that she had escaped. Whether or not she stayed free was up to her and her choices.

Donna bit her lip and blinked back tears as she nodded. “I just need a minute.” She swallowed several times, then took a deep breath once she was sure the tears that had pooled in her eyes weren’t going to fall. “Anyway. It was nothing like what we’d been led to believe and once we were there, they wouldn’t let us leave. And if we tried, we were punished. It took me months to convince them I had accepted my life and my lot in it, until someone trusted me enough that I got a chance to slip away. Now I will do almost anything to keep them from finding me again.”

“Will they look for you or will they figure that you’re gone and there’s nothing they can do?” Jailbait tilted her head to one side, watching Donna.

“They’ll look. They want to make sure I don’t tell their secrets. That would be bad for

them, if anyone believes me.”

“All right. Are they near here?” She seemed to be taking it well and believing her, but Donna couldn’t be sure.

“Not near Casper, at least not too close or I wouldn’t still be here. But they are a few hours away. I didn’t have much cash and spent nearly all of it on the bus ticket here.” She looked away again, not wanting to see whatever might be on the other woman’s face. She had been stupid, she knew it and she’d spent the last year paying for it.

“So you’re willing to travel with a group of strangers, if it will get you away from them, you must be desperate. We’ll do everything we can to help you. Or I will, and it looks like Savage will too. I don’t know what kind of people they were, but we don’t hold people against their will. We’re rough, often crude and a little in your face with our tendency to flaunt how far out of the societal norms we are. But the Souls are some of the best people I’ve ever had a chance to know. They got me out of a bad situation a while back and as you can see, I stuck.” Jailbait’s gaze flicked to the someone approaching from the direction they’d come from, and a smile curved her lips.

Donna turned to see what had gotten her attention and found that the guy from the room where Savage had gotten Jailbait was headed their way, what was his name again? Something even stranger than Jailbait. She didn’t remember. And forgot she even cared when a door opened, and Savage stepped out beside the other man. She stared a moment, wondering what she’d gotten herself into.

She should walk away. Ask him to take her to the shelter right now. But she was only a few hours away. Would they find her at the shelter?

“Uh oh. I see from that look you’re having second thoughts.” Jailbait’s voice made Donna turn and look back at her. “You are, aren’t you?”

Donna's face heated. "I might have been. I mean, really?" Her gaze flicked back to where the two men approached them, then back to the woman sitting across from her. "Look at them, they look like they could rip a grown man limb from limb and not bat an eye. What could they do to me?"

"Donna."

Something about the way the other woman's voice had dropped made her look back at Jailbait. She found her leaning close.

"No Demented Soul would ever hurt a woman. And if he did, the others would sure as fuck make him regret it. But instead of looking at what could they do to you, try to see it this way. What would they do to defend you? Cause let me tell you, Savage might have just met you, but he's already invested. He could have handed you cash and walked away, but he didn't. He wants to make sure you eat. He wants to make sure you get away from here, if that's what you want. Does that sound like someone who would hold you against your will or hurt you?"

Donna thought about that, turning to look out the glass wall at where the two men quickly closed the distance to them, she wondered what it would feel like to be protected by someone like him instead of afraid of him. She wanted to try it. But could she? Her heart said yes. Do it. He was a good man, but that part of her brain that always told her how stupid she was being, piped up. It reminded her she'd thought it was a good idea to join the commune. She didn't know which side would win, but she decided to try to trust her heart, and Jailbait, this time.

Savage sat across the table from Donna in the little diner a few blocks from the motel. Jailbait had gotten the keys to the SUV the girls had been driving and they'd come together but she had told Savage to get their own table. Donna had met her gaze, nodded and agreed. He didn't know what was going on but suspected the two had done some talking, and Donna wanted to tell him something she wasn't ready to discuss in front of others, specifically Dumbass.

Now, they'd placed their orders and sat across from each other, silent. He didn't want to grill her, but he also didn't want to talk too much and make her not comfortable telling him anything. It was a fine line, and he wasn't sure he was walking it well.

He watched her a couple of moments longer then couldn't take the silence any longer. "Where are you from?" he asked, looking for something to talk about, nearly anything, to break the ice so they could talk about what she wanted to, well maybe wanted wasn't the right word. What she needed to talk to him about? Yeah, that felt better.

Donna opened her mouth, but stopped, looked down at her hands tangled in her lap then back up at him.

"Maybe it's better to start there," she said after a moment. She took a deep breath, he wasn't sure if she was preparing herself or just taking in enough breath to talk for a while. "I grew up in west Kansas. I had a good family, but we're not close. When it came time to go to college, I wanted to get away, to see the city. I got into CU Denver, moved into the dorms, and started school." She looked away as she spoke

then turned back to him. “Did you go to college?” She watched him as she asked that.

Savage shook his head. “I joined the military right out of school. I have a degree, but I got it taking classes online.”

“Then you’ve not seen how campus life can be.” The ghost of a smile flitted across her face for a moment before it was gone again. “Things were good. I made friends, went to class, partied a little, but not too much. During my junior year, my best friend and I heard about this group that had formed a commune.” She shook her head and looked out the window beside them as she told her story.

His heart ached for the woman sitting across from him, both at what she’d been through and at the way her ideals had been stripped from her so harshly. He couldn’t remember ever being so optimistic as thinking a commune where they all worked for the good of the group was an ideal situation, but he was glad she’d had that, or had once.

She continued talking, telling him some of what she’d gone through and how she’d escaped them, though he suspected she was leaving much of it out, until their food came. Afterwards, they ate in silence for a couple of minutes while Savage tried to figure out how best to put what he wanted to say into words, that hopefully wouldn’t scare her off.

“I want to help you. I’d like to say let’s get on my bike and go back to Arizona right now, but I can’t. I committed to this trip with my brothers, and I can’t back out of it now, not without some serious consequences.” He didn’t know what those might be, and he wasn’t ready to find out. But he’d help her get north if she wanted, or there were other options too.

“But I’ll take you with us north. We’re going to be just a little ways out of Gillette. We’ll be staying on a ranch owned by one of my brothers. You can stay with me.”

She started to speak, and he held up both hands, stopping her long enough to finish what he'd been about to say. "No pressure. We'll be living a little rough, as in we brought tents. But I packed a four man tent. There's enough room for us to have our own bedrolls, though we may need to borrow one or stop and pick you up a sleeping bag. On the ranch, there's little chance this group will find you, if they come looking that far north."

She stared at him, eyes wide, as he continued. "If, at any time, you decide you want to go into Gillette, I'll take you. If you decide you want to go home, I'll buy you a ticket to go back to your family."

"You don't have to do that. I can't afford to pay you back." Something in her eyes told him there was more to it than that but he wasn't going to ask. Not yet. It wasn't time to get that deep into her past, not here and not if she wasn't ready to tell him.

"And I'm not asking you to. I want you to know you're not stuck. You have options." He drained the last of the coffee from the mug on the table and signaled to the waitress he'd like more, then turned back to Donna. "When we're ready to go home, and I mean back to Arizona, we can talk about what you want to do, okay?"

She blinked at him several times, waiting until after the waitress filled his cup, asked if they needed anything else, and left, then spoke.

"Okay. I can handle that."

"Good. Now, we'll get Jailbait to stop somewhere and get you some clothes, then get back to the motel before time to join the others and pull out."

"I don't need clothes. I can make do with these."

Savage looked at her, not bothering to give what she was wearing a pointed look.

“You have one outfit. Nothing warm enough for nights and nothing to change into. You need at least one change of clothes. I’ve got a couple of other things to pick up too, so we’ll stop. Don’t worry about the cost. You need it, I’ll cover it.” His look didn’t leave any room for argument. He waited but she didn’t try to argue again. Instead, she said two words.

“Thank you.”

Savage didn’t say anything, just nodded. When the others were ready, he slid out of the booth, held a hand out, wondering if Donna would take it. To his surprise, she placed her hand in his and let him tug her to her feet. Hand in hand, they went to the counter where he paid the ticket while she and Jailbait went out to the truck.

“She going with us?” Dumbass asked.

“For now, we’ll see for how long,” Savage said while the other man took care of his bill. Together they went out to the car to meet their women.

Their women. That wasn’t something he’d thought he’d apply to himself. Oddly, it felt right.

Donna had been on the back of Savage's motorcycle for almost an hour before she relaxed enough to enjoy the ride. At first, she wished she'd taken him up on his offer to let her ride in the car they'd taken to the restaurant with some of the women, but then she would have had to talk to them, and they would have had a million questions. She hadn't wanted to face that even if she'd had to sit closer to Savage than she was comfortable with, it would be easier than answering the questions of several women she didn't know.

Now, as she found the tension of the unknown had mostly faded, she could appreciate the peace of riding. There was no one wanting an answer, no one wanting her to make sure they had food, drink or even entertainment, she just had to be. Well, that and live in her own head, but she was mostly used to that.

Now though she pushed thoughts and worries about her life, about the commune and its leaders, about everything but right now from her mind. This ride, this moment of peace was amazing, and she was going to enjoy it.

She had been resistant when Savage had wanted to buy her clothes, but he'd offered her jeans. She hadn't been allowed to wear jeans in almost a year. She'd jumped at the chance, then he'd gotten her several other things, even insisting that she pick out underthings, plus all the other things he insisted were necessary. Then he hadn't even blinked an eye when the total was more than she could have imagined. She'd nearly stopped breathing right there in the store. She had no idea how she would pay him back. She'd tried to tell him that, but he'd just said not to worry about it.

Now, she sat behind him, wondering what he had been thinking then and what he was thinking about now. What kind of person had that kind of money to spend on a stranger, with no guarantee they would even see any of it back?

She didn't know how long they'd been riding, several other bikes rumbling along both in front of and behind them, when Savage reached back with one hand, grabbed her calf, and squeezed briefly before taking hold of the handlebars again.

"You okay back there?" His voice came from somewhere in the helmet he'd given her, startling her. Before pulling out this morning, he'd borrowed the helmet from one of the women in the SUV they'd taken to the store.

It took her a moment to register there must be some kind of radio in the helmet. "Um. Yeah. I didn't know we could talk."

"I didn't think to tell you. I'm sorry. If you need anything, just let me know."

She nodded, then realized he couldn't see her and spoke, "Okay."

"Don't worry. The whole string can't hear you. They're on a different frequency. This is just you and me, okay?"

"Okay." She wasn't sure what else she should say, but now that she knew they could talk, the silence felt awkward.

"You tensed up again." He reached back and patted her leg again then put his hand back on the handlebars. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I was just checking on you."

"No, it's okay." Donna took a deep breath and forced herself to relax before speaking again. "Now that I know we can talk, it felt awkward not to. I was worrying about what I should say."

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to feel that way. I just wanted to be sure you knew you could say something if you wanted, and I would hear you. I’m good with riding in silence if you are. I do it a lot. I can also pair the headset in the helmet with your phone so you can listen to music if you want.”

“I’m good. I’d rather enjoy the scenery and talk to you whenever the mood strikes.” She didn’t want to admit she didn’t have a phone. She already looked weird enough to Savage and his friends. That was just another thing that she wasn’t ready to get into yet. Besides, She’d barely had enough money to get the bus ticket, there was no way she could a phone too.

Donna took a deep breath and leaned into Savage, enjoying the warmth that seeped through the back of his vest and into her. The coat he’d bought kept her from freezing but she wouldn’t call it exactly warm, at least not at the speeds they were traveling.

She had things she needed to tell him if she decided to go to Arizona with him, but she didn’t want to think about that right now. There was time. She could worry about how much to tell him, and when. For now, though, she was going to enjoy the ride and the unexpected pleasure of it.

It was still early afternoon when they pulled the bikes and cars into the ranch. Savage had hoped that Donna might use the ride as a chance to talk to him a little, especially after he'd shown her the radio in the helmets, but she'd been quiet for most of the trip. He wasn't sure if she wasn't going to tell him, if she was trying to decide how much more to tell him, or if she'd just been enjoying the ride. Either was good with him, but there wouldn't be time for much talking for a while. Now they needed to get settled in and he had no idea what that would entail, at least not yet.

It took a few minutes for everyone to be lined up on where to park. After that were greetings and introductions, Savage had met most of the Souls now up here but there were a few who were local recruits that he didn't know, at least not yet. He kept Donna by his side, not wanting her to feel left out or anyone to mistake her as just a piece of ass. At least not until he had a chance to talk to her. Some of the men might proposition her or ask if she was available for a little fun, but no one would force her to do anything she didn't want to. But with what little he knew about what had happened to her recently, he felt better keeping her close.

By the time things settled down, more than an hour had passed since they'd arrived. Lurch called all the of the Souls from Tucson together, told them where to set up their gear and gave them a warning about this being bear country. He reminded them to be safe with anything that might attract one of the animals, then sent them off to get it done.

"I need to get my tent from the trailer, then set it up. Want to come help?" he said to Donna, wondering how all this looked to someone not used to the workings of the

club.

She lifted one shoulder and let it fall in a careless gesture. “Sure. It’s not like I have anywhere else to go or anything else to do. Besides, most tents are easier to put together with two people instead of just one.”

“This one can be done by one, but I’m sure you’re right. It will be easier with two.” He motioned in the direction Lurch had told them to set up their tents. “We’re going to set them up over there. Do you want to go pick a spot while I grab my tent?” He tilted his head toward the trailer where the two prospects were busy unloading things.

“Sure, any preferences?” She turned and watched him while she waited.

“I’d stay close but set a little apart from the group, if they’re close together.” He mimicked her one shoulder shrug from moments before. “We’ve got several couples, and they may get loud at night.”

“Got it.” Her face had turned pink, but she turned and headed for the field he’d indicated without looking like the statement bothered her. He hoped that was right. He and Donna might be in separate sleeping bags, at least to start with, but none of the other couples would be, of that, he was sure.

He collected his tent, pulled their sleeping bags as well as the two bags they called luggage and set them to one side so they wouldn’t have to hunt for them after the tent was done then went to join Donna. When he reached her, the tent slung over his shoulder, he looked around. None of the group was setting up tents in a tight cluster, and for that he was glad. The last thing he wanted was to hear other people having sex in stereo sonic surround sound. Especially if he wasn’t getting any himself.

He scanned the men working on assembly, and where several more had dropped their gear while they took turns helping each other and noticed that Donna was the only

woman out here. He hadn't noticed the women going off together, but obviously he'd missed something.

"I just realized all the women are off doing something else. I missed them leaving. If you'd rather spend time with them, I can do this on my own." Had he kept her too close to him? Was he keeping her from doing something she wanted to do? Making friends when he was certain she needed some?

"No. Jailbait invited me, but I'd rather be here." She scanned the area, then turned to him. "What do you think of here?" She had taken several steps away and stood in the middle of the field, about fifteen feet from the nearest dropped tent.

"I was thinking a little farther away." He scanned the open prairie behind her, spotted an area that seemed mostly flat and level, a little larger than he thought his tent was and headed that way. When he reached it, he stopped and turned back toward the rest of the group. The nearest tent was about fifty feet away, close enough to be heard if they yelled, but not to overhear every word spoken in a normal tone. That would help. He knew from experience that sometimes things that were hard to talk about were just a little easier in the dark, when you couldn't see who you were talking to and could pretend you were just talking to yourself. He wouldn't push Donna, but hoped that maybe she'd talk to him. Tell him whatever she was holding back, because he was sure there was something.

It took Donna a moment to walk out to where he was, she looked around then back at him.

"You're not worried about being too far from the others?"

"They could hear us if we shout, but they won't hear every word we say, and we won't hear everything they say. We won't have anything to attract animals in the tent but if an animal comes up, all we have to do is yell and they'll hear us."

He didn't say he was armed, he didn't know how she would react to that, so no need to bring it up, not yet. Besides, he wasn't sure his .45 would be the best weapon for a bear.

Donna took a second look at the other tents and noticed they weren't much closer than the nearest one was to them now. Savage was probably right. Plus, she'd heard bikers had a tendency to get a bit wild. While she wasn't a prude, she wasn't ready to jump into Savage's bed. And she didn't want to be too close to the others and hear what was going on in other tents to give either of them ideas.

"I'm good with it. What do we need to do now?" She glanced up at the sun, trying to decide how long until it set, and they started losing the light. It was only midafternoon, so they had plenty of time. Probably a good thing. She hadn't put together a tent in a long time and who knew how long it would take them to figure it out.

"You used this thing before?" she asked as he dropped the tent bag on the ground.

"Not this one but I used to have one just like it. It shouldn't take us more than about fifteen minutes to get it up and staked. I pulled it out of the box and added a couple of things to the bag before they loaded it for me." He bent to one knee, unzipped the bag, and started pulling things out, lining them up on the ground. "You ever tent camped?" He glanced up at her, a curious look on his face.

"Yeah, we used to do it all the time growing up, but it's been a few years." She was surprised he hadn't asked sooner, like maybe when they'd been at the store and he'd been tossing things into the cart, telling her they'd need this or that. She hadn't said anything because she'd mostly agreed, and he didn't seem to mind the expense, and the few things she didn't think they had to have, would make the experience a little

more comfortable, and she appreciated that he was thinking not just about what she would need, but what would make her feel better.

It only took them about ten minutes to get the tent set up.

“Do you want to finish staking it down or go get some of our gear?” Savage asked, flipping the rubber mallet he’d pulled from the tent bag in one hand.

Donna looked at the tent then back toward the trailer that had hauled all the gear. She didn’t mind the walk, but between here and there were a bunch of tents and men and she’d rather not walk through them alone, at least until she had to.

“I’ll do the stakes, if you don’t mind getting our stuff,” she offered.

“No problem.” He handed her the mallet, turned toward where they’d parked the vehicles and left at a jog.

She was glad to see he had that much energy, but wasn’t sure she could have done the same, though she wasn’t sure why she was so tired. With a shake of her head, she turned her attention to the stakes on the tent. She’d just finished with the ones on the tent itself and started on the cords that lead to the rain cover when he came back, a backpack slung over each shoulder, both sleeping bags in one hand, and something else, she wasn’t sure what was in his other.

“How’s it going? Need help?” he asked as he approached.

“I’m good.” She hurried around to the front, opened the zipper, and stepped back so he could set things inside rather than on the ground. He put things inside, then toed out of his boots before stepping inside in just his socks. She blinked at his boots sitting just outside the door, then went back to staking out the tie-downs.

“There, that was the last one,” she said as she finished and pushed herself to her feet again.

“Good. Do you want to step in here and make sure this looks all right to you?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Donna said as she made her way back to the doorway. Ducking her head she looked inside and found him on his knees in the middle of the space, a sleeping mat unrolled on either side of the door.

“Which end do you think we should put our heads?” he looked up at her, meeting her gaze. “I prefer feet to the door but I’m not sure it’s just little higher on this side.” He motioned toward the door. “And which side do you want?”

“I don’t know.” She kicked her running shoes off and left them beside his as she stepped inside. “How do you sleep?”

He frowned for a moment. “On my back, usually, why?”

“Because I sleep on my side, usually on my left side if I’m given a choice. And I was just thinking about if I’d rather face the middle or the tent wall. I don’t have a huge preference, so I was going to give you the choice.”

“But you do have a preference?”

She lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “A small one. I’d rather face the middle, but I’m good either way.”

“Then you take this one.” He lifted the sleeping bag he’d bought for her and dropped it on the bedroll to the right of the door, before tossing his own onto the other. “I recommend getting the place organized so if you don’t make it back before dark, you can do everything you need to with just a minimal amount of light. Though I do

recommend waiting to unroll your sleeping bag until later.” He glanced over at where her bag lay on top of the mat he’d already unrolled. “Or maybe go ahead and open it up, then reroll it at least partly so nothing crawls in but you.”

Donna stared at him for a moment then blinked slowly as his words processed. Nothing crawls into her bed but her? She shuddered at the idea of bugs or other creatures in her sleeping bag. He was right though about making sure everything was in place for later. She knelt on her sleeping pad and took care of the few things she had.

Savage knew he had to say something before they finished in the tent and went back out to join the others. He didn't know how she would take what he had to say but it had to be said.

"Hey, I need to talk to you a minute," he said, stopping what he was doing and sitting on his sleeping mat, facing her side of the tent.

"Sure, what is it?" She kept moving, putting things away, but didn't look at him.

"It's kind of serious, can you sit a minute?"

Donna looked at him, frowned, then did as he asked, still holding a package of socks in one hand.

"What is it?" she asked, her hands fumbling with the socks, belying her nerves.

"I wanted to talk to you for a minute about tonight."

She stared at him with wide eyes but didn't say anything.

"I don't know what you've heard about MCs, but it probably wasn't flattering. I'm not going to lie to you, and you've seen a little of it already, but we're not a polite crowd. In a lot of ways, we're a ragtag group of misfits." Savage met her gaze as he said the next part. "But we would never hurt you. Not a single member of the Souls would ever force you to do something you don't want to, if you know what I mean?"

Her face turned pink, and her gaze dropped to the socks she still fidgeted with. “I think so. You’re saying no one will force me to have sex with them.”

“Exactly. I’m not saying no one will ask, or try to convince you. And I wanted to warn you there will be a lot of alcohol and maybe some other things around tonight. You’re welcome to join in, as there will be plenty for everyone. I also wanted to make sure you didn’t feel like you are required to come back here tonight. If someone invites you to spend time with them, and you want to, you can, alright?”

“I just want to make sure I understand what you’re telling me.” Her voice was soft, as if she expected some kind of retaliation for what she was about to say. “You’re telling me it’s okay with you if I sleep with one of your buddies?”

He didn’t like hearing it in those words, but that was a him problem. “I’m telling you that just because you arrived with me, we’re not an item. You’re not limited to me as your only option. If you meet someone you like better, you can go with them if you like.”

Her fingers picked at the socks in her hands for a moment. “What if you find someone you want to ‘be with’?” Her voice had gone even softer, and he had to lean forward to hear her.

“Sweetheart?” He kept his voice gentle, but she didn’t respond, or even look up. “Sweetheart?” Savage repeated, this time leaning close so he could reach out and with one finger, tilt her face up until she met his gaze. “I won’t find someone else. I can promise you that. You can be assured, you come back here any time and it will be just you and me in this tent. I won’t bring anyone else back here, and I won’t be going anywhere else. Understand me?”

Something in her eyes told him she wasn’t sure if she could trust him, but she nodded anyway.

“Okay,” she said after a moment, her voice barely a whisper. “Anything else?”

“Just a couple of things. First, here’s a flashlight for you. Stick it in your pocket so you can find your way back even if you don’t come back until after dark.” He sat back on his sleeping pad took the light he’d set out for her and passed the small flashlight over to her. “And second, if someone bothers you after you say no, then come and find me. I’ll take care of them. I want you to feel safe and free to be you. Is that clear?”

She didn’t say anything, just nodded.

He watched her a moment before looking away.

“Did they show you the bunkhouse, where the bathrooms and showers are?” he asked, trying to fill the silence.

“They did.” She shuffled a few more things. “I was wondering, do you think anyone would mind if I went and took a shower now? I don’t want to be in anyone’s way, but I feel grimy.” She rolled her shoulders back. “And just a bit sore after the ride earlier.”

“I’m sure no one would mind. There probably isn’t even anyone around right now. The guys will either be out doing ranch shit or getting ready for the party tonight. There might be a couple of women around, but my understanding is only the single men live in the bunkhouse.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought about that.” Some of the enthusiasm at the idea of a shower seemed to be gone.

“Don’t worry about it. How about we walk over together and check? If there’s anyone around, I’ll ask. They might even have worked up a schedule already. We’ll

go see.”

“Are you sure? You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. Let’s go.” He waited while she gathered a few things to take with her, then they put their shoes on and climbed out of the tent. He made sure he zipped it closed and together they headed for the bunkhouse.

After a hot shower and changing into clean clothes, Donna felt better than she could remember feeling in ages. She'd combed out her hair and pulled it up and out of her way. As she finished fastening it up, she wished it wasn't so long. She'd wanted to cut it months before and had said as much to Noah. He'd flat refused. They had fought, she'd said it was her hair, she would cut it if she wanted. That had been the first time he'd hit her.

But he's done it for the last time now, she reminded herself as she finished with her hair, gathered her things, and left the bathroom.

"Hey, are you all right?" a couple of the women approached as she stepped out of the bunkhouse and looked around.

Jailbait and Beth, if Donna remembered right. She wasn't sure though.

"Yeah. I'm good." She tried to paste on a reassuring smile. "I was just thinking about something better left behind."

"What are you up to?" the woman Donna thought was Beth asked. "The guys are breaking out the alcohol and talking so we were looking for something else for a bit."

"I need to take this stuff back to the tent, then I don't have anything planned."

"Let us go with you. We can talk about what to do while the men do their thing."

“Okay.” She shrugged and turned toward the field where the tents had been set up. “Are the women not drinking?” She didn’t plan to, but she didn’t think all the women would stay sober. That didn’t really match with what she’d always heard about bikers, or with what Savage had said earlier.

“No, we’ll drink. I just prefer to wait a little longer to get started. We were planning on checking in with you, then with the ladies here to see if they needed any help getting dinner ready.”

“Sure. That sounds great. Let me put this stuff up, then I’ll go with you.”

“No problem,” Beth said, falling into step beside her. They were about halfway across the field when Beth spoke again. “You have such beautiful hair. Is there a reason you keep it pulled up like that?”

Donna resisted the urge to lift one hand and touch her hair, make sure it hadn’t fallen down. “It’s too much. It’s gotten too long. I’m thinking about cutting it, but I guess that will have to wait until I get to a town. Not to mention have the money to have it done.” She didn’t want to say that everything she had was because of Savage’s generosity.

“Really? What kind of cut you thinking about? It would be gorgeous with some layers that hit about here,” Beth held one hand near her own face a couple of inches below her jaw. “And framing your face. Have you ever considered color? I think a couple of the bright fashion colors would look amazing on you, but even highlights would make your eyes pop if you’re not ready to go that extreme.”

Donna stopped and turned to stare at Beth.

The other woman turned pink. “Sorry. I’m a stylist. Once I get started, I have a hard time not making all the suggestions.”

“You do hair?”

Beth nodded. “I brought my scissors, I’m not sure why but I tucked them into my bag. But if we want to do more, I’m sure we can find a Sally’s in town. Sadist said its only about a half hour away.”

Excitement and nervousness battled in her belly at the idea she could actually get her hair cut. “Can I think about it for a little bit? I’m sure I want it cut, but I don’t know how short yet. And I don’t know about the color.”

“No problem. I’m not going anywhere for a while. Besides, I think Sadist will be setting up in the bunkhouse later to do some tattoos. He’ll be busy for hours, if not days, with those. We’ll have plenty of time.”

Donna could just blink. She had never even considered a tattoo. Or thought about someone traveling to do tattoos. It was almost too much to process right now. Besides, she wasn’t at a place in her life where she was ready to make a decision like that. First, she needed to decide what she was going to do over the next few weeks, stay here in Wyoming or maybe go south with Savage and his friends.

After dropping her things off at the tent, taking the time to put them away properly so Savage wouldn’t come back and have to put up with her mess, she followed her new friends, at least she hoped they would be her friends, back to the main house. As they approached the house, she expected they would go to the front door and knock, but instead, Beth and Jailbait led her around the side of the large house to another door, this one standing open.

“Hey, we’re here to see what we can do to help,” Beth said as she led the small group climbing the steps and crossing the porch to the door.

“Hi. Thanks for coming,” said the woman standing in the kitchen, an apron covering

most of the front of her clothing. She appeared to be seasoning hamburger patties, then stacking them up to be cooked later. “We don’t have a lot to do. Tuck, Lurch and the rest of the guys are in charge of cooking. We just need to make sure we’ve got plates, utensils, napkins, and trash bags ready.”

“Oh, that will be nice.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t looking forward to more than doubling what we normally feed around here, but Tuck said the men would take care of all the cooking. He had them set up an outdoor kitchen and everything. There will be some dishes and clean up afterward but that shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Sounds good. I’m Beth by the way, this is Jailbait and Donna.” Beth motioned to each of the women as she introduced them.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. I’ve got so much running through my head right now as I try to make sure it’s all ready. I’m London. Also around here somewhere are Kerry, Robyn, and Bonnie, but I’m not sure where any of them are at the moment.” She lifted one hand showing them it was dirty, as if indicating she’d shake hands but didn’t want to get them dirty.

“Tell us what to do. We’ll get everything handled in no time then we can go enjoy the evening while the men cook,” Beth said.

Hours later, the meal finished, including all the clean-up, Donna looked around the open area between the bunkhouse and the barn where they’d parked all the motorcycles, taking in the scene. There were at least a dozen men, probably more, and at least half that many women, scattered around the area. Some in lawn chairs, some stretched out on blankets, others on a few benches or at the picnic table sitting outside the bunkhouse. As she scanned the area, she noticed that there didn’t appear to be any single women. She would swear she’d met everyone here and they were all

paired off with someone. Except for her. Yeah, she'd come with Savage, but he'd told her she was free to go with anyone she wanted, if she wanted.

"How you doing? Can I get you something to drink?" a man she recognized but couldn't remember his name right away asked as he stepped up beside her. He was blonde, tanned, and looked to be a few years older than she was. Not that she cared about his age. It didn't matter and never would.

"I'm good, thank you. And no, I'm okay with this." She lifted the can of Pepsi she held loosely in one hand. She hadn't had alcohol in almost a year, it was on the list of forbidden things while she'd been at the commune, and with the way things were now, she had no plans to drink anything stiffer than the occasional soda for quite a while. She looked at him and tried to remember his name. It was something odd for a name, Claw? No, but close. "You're Talon, right?"

"You remembered." A big grin covered his face, making him look closer to her age.

"I'm usually pretty good with names." She gave him a shy smile, but did her best not to be too friendly. She didn't want him thinking she was flirting or doing more than just being nice. She turned back to scanning the group scattered in the clearing.

"You looking for someone?" Talon asked.

"Kinda. I was going to see if I could spot Savage."

"That's right. You came with him. You his old lady?"

Donna frowned. She'd heard the term a couple of times and didn't think it meant what it sounded like but couldn't be sure. She didn't want to seem ignorant by asking, so instead decided to ignore the question and keep looking. She was about to give up, see if she could slip away from this guy and go lay down anyway, when she spotted

Savage coming out of the bunkhouse.

“There he is. I guess I’ll see you later.” Donna waved one hand at Talon as she took off toward Savage.

“There you are,” he said as she approached. “I was just wondering where you’d disappeared to. Are you having fun? You want something else to drink?”

“Yes and no. I mean yeah. I’ve had a good time and no, I don’t need anything to drink. I was just looking for you to let you know I’m going to go lay down for a while.”

“Are you okay? It’s still early. Do you want me to come with you to make sure you’re okay?” He looked instantly concerned.

“I’m fine. Yes, it’s still early, but I didn’t sleep much last night. I’m sure I’m just tired. You stay and enjoy yourself. There’s no reason for you not to. I’m sure after a good night’s sleep I’ll be fine.”

He watched her a moment, then nodded. “All right. If you’re sure. I’ll be along later. I don’t know how late I’ll be. If you need anything, call me okay? Did I give you my number?”

“No. No need. I’m just going to sleep.” She didn’t want to tell him there was no point in giving her his number, she didn’t have a phone to call him with.

“If you’re sure.”

He tugged her close, wrapped an arm around her and just held her for a moment. She stood stiff for a moment, but it felt so good that after a moment she relaxed against him. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had held her like this, just wanting

to be close and make her feel better. After a few moments, he loosened his hold, then to her surprise, dropped a gentle kiss on top of her head.

“Sleep well. I’ll try not to wake you when I come in.”

Donna didn’t know how to respond to that, so she nodded, then reluctantly stepped out of his arms. Once away from him, she didn’t hesitate to go back to the tent they would be sharing. She hadn’t lied about being tired, she just hadn’t been entirely honest about why.

Savage watched Donna as she headed off toward the field where the tents were set up. He didn't doubt that she was tired. He would be too if he'd spent the night before the way she had. But he suspected there was something more to it. Something she wasn't telling him. He moved to the picnic table and sat. He faced away from the table, leaning back against it, elbows resting on the surface.

Not that he expected her to tell him all her secrets. No, they were barely getting to know each other, she had no reason to trust him, at least not yet. Did he want to get where she trusted him like that? Yeah. He liked that idea.

"What's up with you?" Jake asked as he sat down beside him. "You look like someone just slapped you upside the head with a dead fish."

Savage turned and stared at the man he'd only been getting to know when he'd left several months before. "Where do you come up with these things?"

"What things?" Jake said, looking as if he had no idea what Savage meant. "I don't say anything weird, but back to my original question. What's got you looking so shocked?"

Savage shook his head, remembering what he'd been thinking about when this friend had come up and pulled his mind away from her. Donna. Not just her but that he wanted her to trust him with her secrets. When had he decided he wanted that? from anyone?

“Just thinking.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to look too clearly at where his thoughts had come from, much less what they might mean. He sure as hell didn’t want to talk about it, or worse, his feelings. He tipped his bottle back and took a long pull, hoping Jake would let it go, but suspecting that wouldn’t happen.

“If I had to make a bet, I’d say it had to do with that piece of ass you brought in with you today. A couple of the others told me you picked her up in Casper this morning. But you know this isn’t an event for a casual backpack, so there’s got to be more to it that I’m not seeing. Especially since none of the older brothers seem to care. Then there’s the women. they seem to have taken her in like she’s one of them.” Jake tilted his head and watched Savage from the corner of his eye.

Savage clenched his teeth and fought the urge to go after Jake for calling Donna a piece of ass. He had no way of knowing different. “Never call her that again. And I’m not sleeping with her.”

Jake turned to stare at him, one brow lifted. “I know I saw you haul two sleeping bags into your tent this afternoon.”

“I didn’t say we aren’t sharing a tent, I said I’m not sleeping with her. She needs help. She’s running from something, more than she’s told me about yet.” He told Jake about how he’d found her that morning, but he didn’t mention that his gut wouldn’t let him leave her behind, not if she was willing to go with him. He wouldn’t have forced her, but he wouldn’t have liked leaving her behind either.

Jake looked like he wanted to say more about Donna, or Savage’s reaction to what he’d said about her but thankfully, he changed the subject.

“I hear Sadist is giving some ink while he’s here.”

“I don’t know that anything is set in stone, but we brought what he said he needs to

do it. Are you looking to have something done?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking about it, but we’ve got a couple of newer brothers who want to get their colors done. I think they were waiting for this, or to have the time to go see him. This works better, at least when it comes to running this place.”

“Speaking of running this place, how’s it been? You ever worked a ranch before coming up here?”

“I like it. It’s different, and no. I’d never been on a ranch, or a horse before. But I like it. I do wish there was a bit more on the tech side, but we’ll get there. There’s talk of adding to that barn,” he tilted his head toward the large building where they’d parked the bikes, “and making it a club house but there’s other shit that’s more important. Maybe next summer? I don’t know.”

“You think you’ll stay up here? Or are you looking forward to getting back to Tucson?”

“I don’t know. I’m not going back this trip, I know that much for sure. I’m going to stay here, help Lurch and the others get this chapter up and running a little better. I honestly don’t have any plans past that.” Jake drained the bottle in his hand, then gave Savage’s a pointed look. “I’m going for another, you want one while I’m up?”

“Sure.” Savage scanned the gathering and wondered what was planned for the next few days. Maybe he’d have a chance to take Donna into town. He didn’t know what Gillette, the nearest town to the ranch, had to offer, but he’d find out and see if she wanted to go do something. From what little he’d told her about where she’d been living, he thought maybe she’d like to go see a movie. He didn’t know what else she might enjoy, not yet but he’d find out.

“You look deep in thought again. Anything I can help with?” Jake said as he

returned. He handed one of the two bottles in his hand to Savage, then sat.

“Not unless you can tell me what’s planned for the next couple of days? I’m sure there will be a ride or two, maybe something else to keep this bunch entertained and out of trouble. Or at least too much trouble.”

“There are a couple of rides planned, you knew there would be but there are days where the activities are optional. Things that you can choose to do or not, and find thing to do on your own.”

“Like?”

“We’ve got horses available if anyone wants to ride, though if any of the women are along, they’ll need one of the locals along.” Jake met his gaze for a moment then looked away. “There’s places to hike, both off and on the ranch, if someone wanted to. Then there’s plenty to do in town, as well as places to ride if you want to ride without the rest of the group too.”

Savage tipped his beer back and took a long pull as he thought about all that. He couldn’t help but wonder what, if any, of it might interest Donna. He didn’t need to ask about the look or why any riding group with the women along would need one of the locals. There were things on the ranch the women didn’t need to know about, and they wanted to make sure they didn’t stumble across them. All the Souls knew about them, but the men from Tucson wouldn’t know exactly what areas to avoid.

“And I’m sure there will be a chance to do some ranch work, if you’d like to get your hands dirty and see what real work is like.”

Savage didn’t justify that with an answer, just shot the other man a look from the corner of his eye. Again, his mind turned back to Donna, he didn’t know why he couldn’t keep from thinking about her. It wasn’t like he’d known her even twenty-

four hours. There was no reason she kept creeping into his thoughts.

“How was the ride up?” Jake’s voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“Long. Never thought I’d say it but after four days straight of riding, I’m glad we aren’t getting back on for another tomorrow.”

“But we’ve got a ride planned. We’re going to take you all up to the Devil’s Tower. You can’t be this close and never go see it!” Jake sounded disappointed that Savage didn’t want to ride tomorrow.

“Do you really? You planned a ride for tomorrow?”

Jake couldn’t hold a straight face any longer and burst out laughing. “We have the ride planned but not for tomorrow. I made that ride a few months ago, we did it faster than four days, and thankfully not on our bikes.” His brother made an admission few members of the club would ever say out loud. The prospects who had been in the truck, towing the trailer full of gear, had bitched about not being able to make the ride on their bikes. And while four days on his bike had left him sore and tired, he’d rather that than four days trapped in the cab of a truck, or worse, a car.

“You enjoying yourself?” Savage watched his friend with raised brows. It took Jake several minutes to stop laughing, then to catch his breath.

“Dude,” Jake said once he’d caught his breath, a grin still covering his face. “You should have seen the look on your face. It was almost a sad, dejected look but so filled with something, I’m not sure what. Like you wanted to go but you didn’t.”

Savage watched as Jake started laughing again, laughing so hard he almost fell off the bench they sat on. Savage could only watch, drinking from the cold bottle in his hand while he waited for the laughter to end. Or something else to come along to distract

him.

After a minute he gave up on Jake finding an end to the hilarity and turned to watch the flames of the bonfire that had been built in the middle of the clearing. As he watched the flames lick toward the sky his mind once more turned to Donna. He wished she had felt better, he'd like to have her here with him now. Somehow, he thought she would enjoy sitting around the fire, just enjoying time with the others. He sure as hell wanted her here and in his arms, or on his lap.

And with that thought he'd had enough for tonight. He finished the beer in his hand, found a can for his empty bottles and headed for the field where the tents sat.

He nodded to several people as he made his way past and pulled the flashlight from his pocket where he'd put it when he'd given one to Donna earlier, just in case he needed it. he didn't turn it on until he got closer to some of the tents, then only to make sure he wasn't going to trip over anyone's tie-down lines.

Tomorrow he wouldn't be so tired. And he'd try to get Donna to talk to him some more about herself. He did his best to stay quiet as he reached the tent, kicked his boots off and brought them, and Donna's shoes, inside then undressed and slid into his sleeping bag. The last thing he wanted was to disturb her.

He didn't know if it was exhaustion from days on the back of a bike, the sweet smell of Donna just a few feet away or the soft, even sound of her breathing as she slept, but he drifted to sleep far faster than he could remember doing in many years.

Something tickled Savage's nose. He moved his face to one side, but it didn't stop. He started to reach up and brush away whatever it was, but his arm was pinned. That wasn't right. There was no reason he shouldn't be able to move his arm.

He tried to remember if he'd done anything last night, but no, he hadn't even had

much to drink before he'd called it a night and gone to bed. Now though it felt like he wasn't in bed alone. Well, as close as it got when you were in a tent and supposed to be alone on your side.

He opened his eyes to find that he lay in the middle of the tent instead of on his side where he'd started, and as he'd suspected, he wasn't alone. They were both still in their own sleeping bags, but Donna lay curled into his side, her face on his shoulder and her hair in his face was what had woken him.

Savage wondered for a moment how they'd gotten this way, he normally didn't move much in his sleep. But to find not just him, but them both in the middle of the floor, something probably happened. If only he could remember what.

She stirred against him, making him look down at her again. Her nose crinkled as her hair brushed across it. her lashes fluttered, then her eyes blinked open. He watched emotions flit across her face as she realized where she was and how they were laying. Then, moving slowly, as if trying not to wake him, she tilted her head back to see if he was awake.

"Morning," he said, hoping she wouldn't panic.

"Um. Morning." She started to move away, but he tightened his arm around her, he wouldn't keep her from moving if she wanted to, but he didn't want her running just because of where they woke. She didn't fight him but when she met the resistance of his hold, relaxed against him.

"I'm not complaining. This is a nice way to wake up, but do you know how we got like this?"

Her face turned pink. "Yeah. Sorry. I got cold last night. I didn't want to wake you. I don't know how I didn't, but before long you'd moved closer, then pulled me into

you.”

Now that she said that it came back to him. He remembered hearing the movement of her sleeping bag. It had taken him a moment or two to register that she was shivering.

“Were you warm enough the rest of the night?”

“Yes, thank you. You didn’t have to, but I appreciate it. You’ve done so much for me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t need to. I want to help you. Help you find your feet, whatever you need.”

“Thank you anyway.”

“I guess I should get up,” he said. “I found out yesterday that the men are in charge of the food this trip, which makes sense there are a lot more of us. I should go help.”

She started moving, trying to get away from him and out of her sleeping bag. Her movements seemed almost frantic.

“Are you all right?”

“Outside. I need to get outside. Now.” He sat up, made it to his knees and unzipped the tent door while she struggled out of her bag. She hurried out, before he had a chance to say anything more. He didn’t think he’d shed a bedroll faster, and in moments he was outside, barefoot and following Donna as she hurried away from the tents, then fell to her knees and vomited.

At a loss as to what might be wrong, he bent, pulled her hair back out of her face to keep it from getting dirty, then knelt beside her and gently rubbed her back while he waited for her to finish. Was it something she’d eaten? Unless she’d taken a bottle back to the tent with her, he didn’t think she’d had too much to drink the night before,

and it didn't smell like alcohol.

Several minutes passed, she vomited several times then sat hunched over, while her stomach heaved, trying to rid it of anything else. He wanted to help but knew until her stomach settled there was little that could be done. Eventually, her stomach seemed to calm. Donna slowly sat up then ran the back of one hand across her lower lip.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"Are you okay? Was it something you ate?"

Her face turned pink. She looked down and shook her head.

"No. Not something I ate and now that I've been sick, it will pass."

"Are you sure? Do I need to take you in to see a doctor?"

"I'm sure. It's gone for now, but might come back." She looked down at her hands, then lifted her gaze, but looked out across the prairie, refusing to meet his gaze. "A doctor won't be able to help."

Savage couldn't keep the concern from his voice. He couldn't help but wonder what was wrong. He put a finger under her chin and gently turned her to face him, but she dropped her gaze, still not meeting her eyes.

"Tell me what it is, babe. I'll help if I can."

Her face turned pink again, then she spoke, her voice so soft he wasn't sure he'd heard her right. "I'm pregnant."

D onna didn't want to see Savage's face. He had to be disgusted with her now and seeing it would break her heart. He would look at her differently, she had no doubt. She didn't know if she could take it.

"Okay. I guess that explains a couple of things. Come on, it's cold out here. You don't need to get chilled." He stood and tugged her to her feet beside him. She realized that he'd followed her in nothing but his underwear. He hadn't even stopped to put on shoes. Not that she had but she'd needed to get as far away as she could before getting sick.

He walked with her back to the tent, helped her inside then followed. After sitting her down, he put his sleeping bag back on the mat where it had started out then sat himself.

"First, it's still cold, you should get dressed. Or climb back into your bag. You don't need to get chilled." He waited until she'd pulled a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt out of her bag and pulled them on, while he did the same. She was still pulling on her socks when he spoke again.

"Wow. I wasn't expecting that. There's a couple of things I need to know. First, and I know this is hard, but I need to know. Were you forced?" His voice was both gentle and steel hard. She didn't know what to think.

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "Forced?"

He swallowed, reached out to touch her then stopped before his hand reached her. His voice was gentle as he found another way to phrase it. "Did they rape you?" There was a growl in his voice she hadn't heard before but oddly, it didn't scare her. She felt like he was getting angry on her behalf, and it made her feel better, at least a little.

"No. I wasn't raped. At least not like you mean."

"What do you mean, not like I mean?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her fingers knotted together in her lap, she kept her eyes on them to keep from having to watch his reaction as she explained. "I said I joined the commune with my friend. That was true, as far as it went. What I didn't say was that it was my boyfriend. We'd been together for about a year before we joined the commune, sleeping together for at least half of that." Donna still didn't look up, she didn't want to see the judgement on his face.

"That doesn't answer my question."

She didn't look at him, didn't answer, and hoped he'd let it go.

"Babe." His voice was barely more than a whisper. "I need to know. It's not going to change how I see you. But I need to know if I need to find someone and make him pay. I need to know how gentle I need to be with you."

His words made her look up. She hesitantly met his gaze, half afraid of what she'd see there but all she saw was compassion.

"Did he force you?" he asked again.

"He didn't see it that way. He said I was his and I had to give it to him whenever he

wanted. If I said no or fought, he hit me. I learned it was easier just to give in.” She couldn’t help the tears that pooled in her eyes, but she blinked several times and kept them from falling.

She saw his jaw flex, one hand clenched into a fist, then relaxed and wondered what he was thinking.

After a moment, he spoke again.

“I’m so sorry, babe. If I could go back and keep you from having to go through that, I would. Will you let me hold you?” He held his arms out, welcoming her into his lap.

She didn’t know why, but she trusted him. She wanted to say she could do this, she didn’t need any help, but his offer had her emotions bubbling over and before she could find the resolve to stay where she was, she’d already moved to sit on his lap. Savage folded his arms around her, making her feel safe for the first time in months.

Donna didn’t know if it was relief at feeling safe, admitting what had been happening or hormones, but she couldn’t hold the tear back any longer. Sobs wracked her body and everything she’d held back for months, since long before she’d discovered the pregnancy, came rushing out.

She had no control. Savage couldn’t have been expecting this, and Donna knew she needed to stop, get control of herself, and let him go. No doubt, now that he knew everything, he’d have no issue finding her a shelter and dropping her off. She wanted to say she would go. She didn’t blame him for not wanting to take on her drama. And in reality, she didn’t blame him. No one wanted to take on a woman already carrying someone else’s child and she wouldn’t expect them to. But she couldn’t stop.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, unable to control the emotion that seemed to pour from her. Through the whole thing, Savage simply held her, one hand making

gentle circles on her back while he murmured reassurances and told her they would figure things out. She wasn't in this alone and he would help her. She didn't know why he would want to but right now those words helped more than she'd known was possible.

"Feel better?" he asked after she'd cried herself out, then sat limp in his arms until she felt somewhat human again.

"Kind of. Oh shit. You were going to go help with breakfast. I'm sorry." She started to get up, to move away. But his arms around her tightened, keeping her where she was.

"Don't worry about it. There are enough of us they probably won't even miss me for one day. We've got a few things we need to talk about. First though, are you hungry? Can you eat? Do you need anything?"

She took a deep breath and thought about it for the first time since they'd come back into the tent.

"I need to use the bathroom," she said with a wince. She hated admitting that to him but now that she had thought about it, she needed to go asap.

"No problem. But shoes this time." He reached over and grabbed her shoes from next to the door, handing them to her before he reached for his own. "We should have gotten you a pair of flip flops too. They would be easier to get in and out of for quick trips. We'll have to see about a trip into town to get you some."

Donna slid off his lap and pulled her shoes on, giving him the room to get into his own. She couldn't help but stare wide eyed as he pulled a holster and pistol from somewhere and fastened them to his jeans. She hadn't noticed he was armed. Not that she cared, but how had she missed it?

All things considered, being out here in the middle of a field, on a ranch with no town or anything around, there was probably wildlife that it was a good idea to be armed against. It wasn't like she'd never seen, or even shot, a pistol before, she just hadn't realized Savage had one.

"I really don't—"

The low rumble coming from his chest stopped her, from both speaking and in mid-tying one shoe. She looked up at him, eyes wide.

"You can stop right there." His voice was low, but hard. "I told you we would figure this out. Don't try to stop me from getting you what you need. We're going to get you to the bathroom, then come back here and talk for a bit. There are some things we need to establish between us, one is that I'll be taking care of you, and you won't fight me about it. If I want something you don't, we can talk about it, but you need shoes you can get in and out of easily, in case you need to go to the bathroom or leave in a hurry again. It's pure luck you didn't step on something sharp the last time. I'm not going to try to control you, but I won't take no for an answer when it comes to your safety. Got it?"

Donna took a deep breath and tried to let go of her need say no, to do without so she wasn't a bother. It wasn't easy but she would try. Plus, she really needed to pee.

"All right." She pushed herself to her feet. "We can talk more after we get back." She wasn't sure how much he would expect her to tell him, and she needed some time before she had to face that.

She wasn't sure she could rely on him but right now, the idea that she didn't have to do everything on her own, which was what she'd assumed when she'd run from the commune, was a relief. She would take help as long as it didn't cost her more than she was willing to give.

By the time she made it out of the tent, Savage was there beside her. She didn't know why he wanted to go with her but at the moment she was just glad not to be alone.

Savage's mind spun what seemed like a million miles an hour as he walked to the bunk house with Donna. She was pregnant.

How bad did her situation have to have been for her to go on the run while pregnant? And knowing what he now knew, that her ex, because that was the only way he would consider the bastard, had forced her. That made him want to hunt down the son of a bitch and make him suffer before he killed him. There were few things Savage had no tolerance of, and abusing women and children was on that list.

He fought to keep Donna from seeing how her abuse enraged him. He knew he hadn't been able to keep from her that it had angered him, but he could only hope she hadn't seen the extent of his rage. It wouldn't help her feel like she could trust him, and she could.

Savage didn't know how, especially in such a short amount of time, but Donna had found her way under his skin, and he found he didn't mind. In fact, he liked having her close.

When they'd both had a chance to use the facilities, they found there was food ready, so instead of going right back to the tent, they got food, then settled at one of the picnic tables, just the two of them.

"Do you want to talk while we eat, or would you rather wait?"

He would rather talk but he wouldn't force her to do it now, when they could be

overheard. He knew this wouldn't be an easy conversation for her and didn't want to make her more uncomfortable than necessary.

Donna looked down at the plate in front of her then back up at him. She blinked, then glanced around before speaking.

"Can we start, then if I decide it's too much for here and now, call a halt?"

"You can. I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable or hurt you in anyway, babe. I just have some things I need to know, and things you need to know too, alright?"

"Okay." Her voice was soft as she spoke between bites. But at least she didn't sound terrified. He could handle that.

"I think the first thing we need to know is how far along are you?"

She frowned. "I don't know. How would I know that?"

"There are several ways, but we'll get to that? Aside from the sickness, how do you know you're pregnant?"

"I'm late. I'm never late."

"Okay, that's good. How late?"

"Two weeks."

"Good. That's good. It gives us some options. First, does anyone else know? Will the father be coming after you for the baby?"

"No. I didn't tell anyone. I have been wanting to get out for a while, but when I

realized I'm pregnant, I knew it had to be now. If they found out, they'd never let me go. Not that they will let me go now, but I couldn't let a child of mine be raised in that group."

"Okay. That leads to the next question. Before I ask it, I want you to know I'm not going to try to push you in either direction, and I'll help you either way, but do you want to continue the pregnancy?"

Donna looked at him for a moment before dropping her gaze back to her plate. He thought for a moment she might not answer him. Hell, for all he knew she hadn't even thought about it. He was about to give up and move on to the next topic, planning to come back around to this one, when she spoke.

"It would make things easier, I know. But I can't. I know it's an option for a lot of people and I don't object to it, but I couldn't live with myself if I did that." Her voice was soft, and she kept her face turned toward her plate, but he could see her watching him.

It didn't escape his notice that she'd never said the word abortion, neither had he, and that was deliberate. But he hadn't lied. He wasn't going to push her either way, only help with what she wanted.

"Okay. I can understand that. Next question is kind of a follow up, and I totally understand if you don't have an answer yet. In fact, I don't expect you to have an answer. I just want you to start thinking about it. Again. I'm not going to push you toward either option. We just need to know what you want so we can move forward, do you understand?" He set his fork down and watched her. He didn't want to miss any tiny indicators in her expression or reaction.

"Okay." Her voice was soft, and she never looked up from her plate, where she pushed her food around but hadn't taken a bite since before his last question.

“Babe,” Savage gentled his voice, “I need you to look at me a minute, okay?”

Slowly, she lifted her head, then after another moment her gaze flicked up to his face then dropped again.

“Babe, I know this isn’t a comfortable conversation, but it’s an important one. I need you to pay attention to me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I know you are. But I want you to see me too. I want you to see that all I’m interested in is what you want. I want to take care of you, but I don’t want to be one of what seems like a long string of people telling you what’s best for you. I want you to have an active participation in all the decisions.”

It took another couple of moments, but she lifted her gaze to his.

“Thank you. I’m serious, Donna. I want to help you. I want you to think about what you want and let me know, okay?”

The silence stretched between them. After what seemed like an eon, but was about thirty seconds, she nodded.

“I need you to say it, babe.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now, what I want you to think about, I mean really think about is do you want to keep the baby.” She started to say something, but he lifted one finger and continued. “I’m not done. I’m not asking if you want to terminate the pregnancy. You said no, that’s fine. We’re moving on. I’m asking if after the baby is born, do you

want to keep it. To raise it and know that you will likely look into a face that, at least a little, reminds you of their sperm doner. There are other options. Options that could have you in the kid's life or not. And don't give me an answer now. Think about it. In the meantime, we need to see about getting you medical care. Damn, I wish Kinard had made this trip." The brother wasn't a women's doctor, but at least he would be able to give them an idea of Donna's general health and tell them what they should do. Hell, maybe he should call him and find out.

He watched as she blinked several times then took a deep breath, never looking away from him.

"Okay. You're right. I need to think about that. I hadn't even gotten that far." She looked away for a moment then back at him. "What else?"

"I'm going to make a couple of calls later. We'll figure out what we need to do to make sure you get the care you need. If you decide you want to go home to wherever you came from, I'll help you get there. From the way you spoke yesterday, it seemed like you didn't have anywhere to go. That's okay too. I'll take you back to Arizona with me, if you want to go. I'll give you a bedroom and we'll figure things out."

Donna tilted her head and watched him, the look that reminded him of a beaten dog almost vanishing as she watched him, a question in her eyes.

"Why?" she said when he stopped talking and looked back down at his plate. He still had a few bites left.

"Why what?" he asked before taking a bite.

"Why do this? Why help me? You don't know me, this isn't your kid. Why would you do this?"

Savage tilted his head to one side, watching her a moment.

“You need to actually eat, not just push that around your plate and if you want an honest answer, I don’t know.”

Donna pulled her plate close again and took a bite but when he said he didn’t know, she looked up at him and frowned.

“Don’t think I’m lying to you. I’ll do my best not to do that. There may be things I can’t tell you, and I’ll not lie to you then, I’ll just say I can’t tell you. We’ll get more into that later. As to why I want to help you? It feels right.”

She opened her mouth to say something, he wasn’t sure if it was a question or to protest in some way, and he didn’t care, he wasn’t finished. He pointed to her plate and continued to talk as she took another bite.

“Something about you yesterday spoke to me. I couldn’t have walked away without talking to you, and once I did, I was kind of a goner. Something in me needs to help you, at least as much as you’ll let me.”

“What do you want in return? You can’t just want to help me and not get something back.”

A couple of the guys wandered up, got plates, then looked around and sat at another table, as if they realized this was a private discussion.

“I’d like to say I’m that altruistic, but we both know that’s not reasonable.” He looked down at his own plate for a moment before lifting his gaze to watch Donna once more. “I’m trying to find a way to put this that doesn’t sound self-serving. There are a lot of things I want from you, but I don’t expect them. I will help you if I get none of what I want.” He gave her a wry half smile. “I told you yesterday that you’re

welcome to go with anyone you want, and it's true, I won't stop you if you decide you want to hook up with one of my brothers, though I recommend you pick one of the single ones if you do. I hear some of the wives can be touchy as hell if you touch their man. That said, I hope you don't. I hope if you want something, to be comforted, held, taken care of in any way, you'll come to me."

She stopped eating and stared at him for a moment, a frown marring her brow. Savage wanted to reach out and smooth the wrinkles from her skin but held back the desire. She may not be comfortable with such a casual touch, not yet but he hoped to get her there.

Yes, he'd held her not an hour ago while she'd cried and let out all her pent-up emotions, but this was different, this would be a casual touch and he didn't want to frighten her. She'd been through enough of that.

"Come to you? You mean you are still interested? Even with..." She used one hand to motion toward her own body. Savage assumed she meant even with her being pregnant.

"Babe, just give me a chance and I'll show you how interested I am." Despite his trying to hold it back, the words had come out as little more than a growl.

Her eyes went wide. "Oh." She dropped her gaze back to her plate. "I thought you wouldn't want to touch me again, not once you found out." Her voice had gone soft again and he barely heard the words.

"I'm not sure where you got that idea, but we can discuss that after you finish eating." He gave her plate a pointed look, took his last bite then turned the subject to something more pleasant. "Tell me more about you. You said you're from Kansas? Where about?" This had been a tense discussion and he wanted her to have a chance to relax. Maybe she would eat more on her own if she wasn't stressed about what

they were talking about.

“Dodge City.” She lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “What about you? Where are you from?”

Savage didn’t like to talk about himself but since he was asking about her, it seemed only fair, especially since he wanted her to trust him.

“I’m from California. Though I don’t normally admit to it,” Savage said after a moment.

She’d just taken a bite and was busy chewing but the quizzical look on her face let him know he’d confused her. Still, he waited until she could speak before saying anything more.

“Why?” she said after a moment. “They too extreme to suit you?”

“Nah, it’s more that I got tired of incorrect stereotypical assumptions. And not in the way you probably think. You say California and most people think of Sunshine, beaches, and surfers. And yeah, part of California is like that, but not the part I came from. I’m from up north, think mountains, redwoods, and weed.” He watched for a moment as she continued to eat.

Good. Talking about something else had her more relaxed and he was glad to see it.

“Anyway, I quit telling people where I’m from about the fiftieth time someone called me surfer boy.”

“I take it you don’t surf?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’d never even touched a board before I joined up. It wasn’t until

I was at Coronado that I learned. Where I grew up was too far from the ocean to spend much time there, plus the water was way too fucking cold. Not that it's much better farther south, but the waves are better down there. I did eventually learn to surf, but I'd rather dive."

"Dive? You dive?"

"I do. It was kind of a requirement when I was in the Navy."

"I really don't know why I'm surprised." She took the buttered biscuit that was the last thing on her plate, tore off a chunk and popped it into her mouth.

Savage lifted one shoulder and let it fall. "Why would you know? We've only known each other for a little over twenty-four hours. In that time, I've been more concerned with making sure you're taken care of than sharing my life story."

"I guess. I just feel bad that I know so little about you other than you live in Arizona, you call these men brothers," she motioned around them where several of the people he'd ridden up with milled around or sat at other tables eating, "and you are incredibly kind and generous."

Savage shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with her assessment of his character. He would admit he didn't go out of his way to be unkind, unless someone deserved it. But he didn't think of himself as generous either. But oddly, he couldn't watch Donna do without, especially if he had the ability to make sure she had whatever she needed.

Donna tilted her head and watched him for a moment. She didn't think he would appreciate it if she pointed out that he was blushing, so she popped the last bite of her biscuit into her mouth and reached down for something else and found her plate empty except for a few crumbs.

"We can get more if you'd like."

She looked up to find Savage watching her. A little embarrassed, she looked down at her plate and tried to think about it. Was she still hungry? Did she want more?

"No, better not. This is more than I've had at any meal in quite a while, and I don't want to upset my stomach again."

"Are you sure? There's plenty of food, there always is with us. You never have to worry that you're taking food from someone else when you're with the Souls."

"I'm sure. I think if I ate more, it would make me sick, and I don't want to deal with that again so soon."

"I don't blame you." He took a deep breath, then continued. "But if you get hungry, say something. We will find something for you."

"I don't want to be a bother." Donna stood and picked up her plate, then looked around for a trash can.

“Here.” Savage took the plate from her, stacked it with his and dropped them both into the trash, then with a gentle hand on the small of her back, he guided her to a large ice chest where he pulled out two bottles of water and handed her one. “Come on, let’s go put our tent in order, then we can figure out what to do with the rest of our day.”

Once more his hand rested low on her back as they walked. Donna had found it slightly uncomfortable at first, as it reminded her of the way Noah had used a hand there to push her where he’d wanted her to go. She hadn’t said anything as she didn’t want to upset him. But it hadn’t taken long for her feelings about Savage’s hand in the small of her back to change. Once she realized he wasn’t going to shove her along like Noah had, but instead he used gentle pressure to steer her, she’d started to find it reassuring.

She never had to worry about how to find him or where he was. The hand on her back that had been disconcerting at first, had quickly become reassuring. Donna also got the impression that part of the reason he kept his hand there was because he wanted to touch her. Since Savage had been nothing but kind and gentle with her, and never pushed for more than she was willing to give. With the exception of his pushing for information in order to keep her safe or take care of her. Even she could admit she’d needed to tell him all of it, it just hadn’t been fun, or easy.

On the way back to the tent, Savage pulled out his phone, typed up and sent a text, but since Donna knew it couldn’t be for her, she didn’t pay much attention. When they reached the tent, Donna once more kicked her shoes off before stepping inside, leaving them outside as she had before.

Inside, she put her sleeping bag back on top of her mat, then rolled it halfway, the same as Savage was doing. The last thing she wanted was to climb into bed and find she had a six or eight legged bed mate. Or worse one with no legs. She trusted him, so she followed his example when it came to things she wasn’t sure about.

After they had the tent neat again, Savage sat on the empty section of his mat, legs crisscross.

“First, let me have your phone. I want to make sure you have my number, before I forget again. I want you to be able to reach out any time.” He held out one hand, palm up.

Donna stared at his hand for a moment, wondering the best way to handle this. After a few seconds she decided head on was best. She’d already told him things that were far more embarrassing.

“I don’t have a phone,” Donna said as she moved to sit on her own sleeping mat.

“Not there.” Something in Savage’s voice stopped her mid-movement. She turned and frowned at him, not sure what he wanted. “Come sit over here.” He patted the mat next to him. “Or I’d prefer here,” he laid one hand on top of his crossed legs, “but I’ll let you make the final decision with what you’re comfortable with.”

Donna looked at the hand, then up to his face with a scowl.

“What? You’ve already been in my lap once. I didn’t molest you then and I won’t now. I just thought we’d both enjoy that more. And while it might feel a little odd at first, I like having you in my arms. It seemed, at least to me, that you didn’t mind being there either.”

Donna watched him for a moment, suspicious. But he was right. She had liked the taken care of feeling when he’d held her that morning. On top of that, he’d never been anything but gentlemanly toward her. Besides, she reminded herself, if he tried anything she didn’t want, she’d be in the perfect position to use her elbows against him.

After making her decision, she wiggled around until she sat in his lap, facing her side of the tent, her back to his chest. His arms came up around her, crossed low on her belly and after a few seconds, she leaned back, letting the warm strength against her back comfort and relax her.

“Why don’t you have a phone?” he asked.

Donna closed her eyes a moment as she let the low rumble of his voice vibrate through her, making some of the tension sitting like a rock low in her belly unfurl and seem to not weigh so heavily. She took a deep breath, trying to find the right way to say it, then realized it would probably sound naive and stupid any way she put it, so might as well get it over with.

“I gave it up before I joined the commune, and while some people had them, it was only the higher ups and people in charge. There were only four or five phones at the compound. The ones in charge kept them. It sounded reasonable at first. Fewer bills, but they would be available if anyone needed one for some reason.” She shrugged.

“But it wasn’t what it seemed when you joined, was it?” Savage’s voice was gentle as he spoke.

Donna didn’t say anything, only shook her head. She didn’t want to say how stupid she felt for falling for the scheme that was the commune.

“Let me guess, if you asked to use the phone, either it was unavailable with some reasonable excuse, or there was some reason you couldn’t make your call privately. They were making sure you didn’t say anything to anyone that might come get you, or help you escape.”

She started to twist around to look at him, she wanted to ask how he knew that, but as she started to move, Savage’s arms tightened around her.

“We’re good. You’re fine.”

She tensed for a moment, not liking that he held her but after a moment she relaxed again.

“I don’t know how you know that, but yes. I eventually gave up on getting a hold of a phone or having a chance to call for help, though I’m not sure who I would have called.”

“What about your parents? Wouldn’t they have helped?”

“They probably would have, if they were able.” She took a deep breath and mentally braced herself. “I was a surprise baby, long after my parents had given up on having children. My parents were older.”

“Were?”

“Dad was almost 70 when he died last year. Mom is only a few years younger, but she’s been dealing with dementia for several years. Last time I had a chance to go home, she didn’t know me, she didn’t even remember having a child at all. And her doctor told me she was going downhill fast.” She stopped, forced herself to swallow and took several deep breaths while ignoring the tears that welled in her eyes and slipped silently down her face. “I know I should go and see her again, but it hurts so much to have the person I love the most look at me and not know who I am.”

“Oh, babe. I can’t imagine. That has to be heartbreaking.” Savage’s arms tightened his arms around her and rocked side to side slowly for a moment.

“It is. And to make it worse, I can’t bear to go see her because it breaks my heart every time she has no idea who I am. A little more of my heart dies every time and I just couldn’t take it anymore.”

“And it’s not like she can miss you if she doesn’t remember you, right?”

“Exactly. I feel guilty, but I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

“That’s understandable.”

Donna wasn’t sure if he was justifying her actions or just trying to keep her calm, either way she appreciated it.

Something vibrated in his pocket. Savage shifted, pulled his phone from his pocket, and used one hand to navigate to see what the notification was, then after a moment, spoke again.

“You said you’re how late again?”

“Two weeks.”

“Okay, I thought so, I just wanted to be sure. I have a brother who’s an NP. I texted him this morning asking questions about care for you, how soon do we need to get you to a doc, what it’s safe to do, like riding a bike, that kind of thing.”

She was both touched that Savage would think to do that and a little annoyed that he did it without asking her first. What if she hadn’t wanted to know? No. that wasn’t reasonable. She took a breath and reminded herself he probably knew even less than she did about pregnancy and babies and that was saying something because she knew very little.

“What did he say?”

“We should probably pick up a home test, just to be sure. And that they’re accurate, in fact many doctor offices use them. He also says that unless there’s some reason

like vomiting that won't stop or bleeding, you don't need to see a doctor for a few weeks. So if you want, we can wait until we get to Arizona. One of my brothers down there recently had a baby, so his wife will know a doctor you can see."

"Okay." That was a lot of information, and it took her a moment to process it. "Anything else? What's safe or anything I shouldn't do?"

"He says that other than the obvious things to avoid like alcohol and drugs, all kinds, not just the illegal ones, you can do nearly anything you want, including sex."

Donna's face heated and she was glad her back was to Savage. She fought the urge to squirm in his lap as she wondered if he'd asked his friend about sex or if the other man had added it in on his own.

How much weirder would her life get?

Savage shook his head and wondered why he'd added that last bit. Yes, Kinard had included it in his message as a safe activity, but had Savage needed to say it out loud?

"Okay," he said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. "That sounded like I was making hints or pushing and that was not my intention. I was only trying to pass on all the information I was given."

Donna laughed, a soft chuckle that made his body respond. Savage reminded himself that this was not the time, not with her sitting on his lap and able to feel every twitch his body made.

"So we have a couple of things we need to pick up in town, can you think of anything else you want or need while we're there?"

She took a deep breath. "I can't think of anything I need. I know you want to get me some kind of slip-on shoes, but I can do with what I have. I don't know what the other thing you think I need is. I really don't need you to buy me more. You don't need to spend more money on me than you already have."

"The other thing is a test, just to be sure. But I'm sure if I think about it, I can come up with a few more things you need. And the more you tell me you don't need, the more I'll buy, until you get the idea that I don't care what it costs, got it?"

She twisted around in his arms, and he let her. He could have tightened his hold on her to keep her from moving, but he wasn't trying to control her, and that was what

keeping her from turning to face him would have been. She'd had enough power plays, and it wasn't something he needed to do. He just wanted to make sure she was taken care of.

"Why? Why do you insist on spending your money on me? What makes you think I'm worth it? That I'm worth your time and the money I know you had to have worked hard to earn?"

"Babe, first, get comfortable." He used his hands on her hips to turn her, so she sat sideways instead of facing forward on his lap, then he continued, "Second, I'm the one who gets to decide how I spend my money. And who said anything about worth or deserving? I've met people with millions who don't deserve to be the gum on the bottom of my shoe. Since when does the world award worth and value? I see something you need, or something I think you need and I'm going to get it. Don't worry about money. I've got enough."

"I just don't want to see you spend it on me when I don't need it."

Savage tilted his head back and looked at the top of the tent while he took a deep breath and tried to remember she'd been abused and needed patience. "Let's move on from that for a minute. You said something earlier that I didn't want to go into out there, but now I'd like some answers, if you can give them to me. You know you can trust me and I'm not going to hurt you, right?"

She didn't look up at him but nodded, her gaze on her hands that were folded in her lap.

"Donna?" He kept his voice gentle.

"Yes?" Her voice was soft, as if she was afraid of what he was going to say next.

“Look at me, please, babe.”

Time seemed to stretch between them. It seemed like an eon had passed before she looked up at his face. He couldn't help the pleased smile he flashed her. He'd been afraid he'd have to lift her chin till she looked at him, but she'd done it on her own. He was proud of her for that.

“Thank you. Now I need to hear you say the words. You do know that you can say anything to me, you can tell me anything and I will not raise a hand to you, right?”

A look flashed through her eyes that he thought might be panic. He pushed back his urge to growl and demand who had hurt her. He suspected he already knew, though he hadn't bothered to ask the fuckwad's name. He didn't want to know, not yet. If he knew he might make a few calls and have the man taken care of. Savage wanted that pleasure for himself.

“You're serious?” Her eyes went wide, and she stared at him, as if she wasn't sure if she could believe what he was saying.

“I'm serious, babe. I don't know what all your loser ex did or said to you.” She started to say something, but he shook his head and continued. “You don't need to tell me. Not yet. I'm not saying I don't want to know. But I want you to get to know me better, to want to tell me, not feel like you have to. I know enough for now and we'll deal with it together when you're ready to tell me the rest, okay?” He used one hand to smooth her hair back from her face.

She stared up at him for several seconds, blinking twice before speaking again. “Okay. I will do my best.” Her gaze dropped to her lap again. “It's hard but I will try. I'll probably screw it up. I seem to screw everything up, but I'll do my best.” Her gaze flicked back up to his, as if she remembered she was supposed to be looking at him and didn't want to be in trouble for looking away.

“Your best is all I can ask. I know it’s not easy to change habits, and that it can’t be done overnight. Especially when these things have become habits in self-defense. I won’t hold it against you if you’re not perfect, but remember even when you aren’t perfect, and really babe, who is? No one, that’s who. We all make mistakes. We all screw up in one way or another. Even me. And I fully admit that if this lasts very long, I’ll probably say or do something that scares you or hurts your feelings.” He kept moving his hand from her brow, over her head and down to her back before starting over again. “But I won’t hurt you physically ever, and I won’t hurt your feelings on purpose. If you’ll try to trust me, I’ll do my absolute best to be worthy of that trust, all right?”

Her gaze dropped for a moment and Savage said nothing, just waited. If he demanded her trust, he was no better than the piece of shit who had abused her. He would not be another reason any woman acted like a kicked puppy. Ever.

After a long moment, maybe thirty seconds, she looked back up at him. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I can ask, babe. Now I’ve got a couple of things I want to ask you about, questions from things you said before, then I’ll look at borrowing a vehicle so we can go into town.”

Still sitting sideways on his folded legs she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “What do you want to know?”

“You said something earlier that caught my attention, I didn’t question it then because we were where we could be overheard, and I didn’t want you to feel like I was airing your personal business but it’s something I need to know about.”

She frowned and he watched as her eyes flicked back and forth as she tried to remember what had been said and what he might be wanting to know. After a moment he took mercy and just said it.

“You said something along the lines of no one else wanting you because you are pregnant with someone else’s kid. Where did you get that? Cause I assure you it’s in no way true.”

She looked up at him and opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came out. Donna looked away, not down at her lap but across the tent at the wall.

“That’s what Noah used to tell me. While he was, well, you know. That he was going to get me pregnant with his brat, those were his words, then no one else would want me.”

“Oh, babe.” He tightened his arms around her again, just holding her close. At the same time, he wished he had ten minutes with this Noah bastard. He’d give him a few quick lessons about how to treat a woman and manners because it was clear he had none. “He was wrong. So wrong. Well, it might be true for him, but there are a lot of men who find pregnancy sexy.”

“Yeah, because puking, waddling, and stretch marks are so attractive.” Disbelief was clear in her voice.

“I’ll give you that not every part of it is appealing, but the waddling and stretch marks? Way more than you might think. I think it shows a woman’s strength. She created something precious and has the marks to prove it. It’s something I could never do, and it leaves me in awe and wonder at the whole thing.”

“Really?” She tilted her head toward him and let it rest against his chest.

“Yes, really. I told you before, honesty between us, right? I meant it.” He rested his chin on top of her head, his arms still holding her snugly as he got the sense she needed the reassurance. He stopped trying to control his dick’s reaction to having her warm and soft in his lap. Maybe if she didn’t believe his words, she would believe his

body's reactions to her.

After just a couple of minutes, she started shifting in his lap, then turned and looked up at him, eyes wide. Savage could see the nervousness filling them.

"I'm not pushing you for anything. You're not expected to take care of it. I just stopped fighting it, thinking you might believe my physical reaction more than my words."

Donna opened her mouth to say something then closed it again and dropped her gaze. She shifted again.

"What was the plan for today?" she asked after a moment.

"Do you want a shower or to change clothes before we go into town?"

"I don't need a shower, but I'd like to change."

"Okay, you do that while I go see about a car. If we need to, we can take the bike, but I'd rather not for this. Just in case we need to haul something that won't fit on the bike."

She took a deep breath and let it out, then started to move, getting up from his lap and moving to where the backpack he'd gotten for her things when they'd gone shopping the day before. She had remembered the hair dye Beth had mentioned but wasn't sure if it would be safe. Did pregnant women dye their hair? She'd never paid attention and had no idea. Better safe than sorry, she'd decided. She could dye it later if she wanted.

"I don't need that much," she said.

Savage didn't say anything, just folded his arms across his chest and watched her with one lifted brow until she turned and looked at him.

"I'm not telling you not to get what you want. I'm just saying I don't need anything more." She turned back to her bag and continued to dig through and pull items out. "But you'll spend your money any way you see fit and I can't stop you, even with common sense."

"Damn straight." He pushed himself to his feet and went to see about borrowing the SUV the girls had driven up from Tucson.

Hours later, Donna lay in her sleeping bag, staring up at the stretch of nylon above her head. The sun had set over an hour ago and she was so tired her entire body ached, but her mind wouldn't quit spinning. They'd gone into town and gotten several things, not the least of which was a pregnancy test.

After leaving the store, as they sat in the car he'd asked if she wanted to take it now, or go back to the ranch to do it. Donna didn't want to monopolize the bathroom in the bunkhouse, or risk anyone else finding out before she was sure and ready to share, so she'd opted to do it while in town. He'd found a gas station that looked relatively clean, she'd pocketed the test and they'd gone inside.

Donna had asked to use the restroom while Savage had wandered around the place shopping. By the time she'd gotten the results, exited the bathroom and was ready to leave, Savage stood at the register with a stack of snacks, sweets, and a few drinks.

"Well?" he'd asked as they settled into the front seats of the borrowed SUV.

"It was positive. I'm pregnant." She felt kind of numb. Though she wasn't sure why. She had already known but somehow seeing the result in the little window had been like a blow to the stomach.

"You said you were, but now we have confirmation. Good thing we already picked up the vitamins Kinard suggested. The rest can wait until we get to Tucson." He reached over and squeezed her hand. She stared at their hands for a moment, still in a daze. "Are you all right?"

The question shook Donna out of her daze. She blinked several times as she looked up and met his gaze.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I asked if you are all right, but I think you might not be.” He leaned over, wrapped an arm around her and tugged her close for a moment, or as close as he could with the console between them. “It will be okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks. And thank you again for the phone. I don’t know how I’d manage all this without you.” She gave him a wan smile then turned to stare out the far window as they made their way back to the ranch.

That had been hours ago, now, not for the first time, she found herself listening to Savage’s breathing, wondering if he was asleep and if not, what he was thinking. She’d been surprised when he’d come to bed shortly after she had. He’d said there was something called a poker run planned for the next day and he wanted to make sure he was well rested since he would have precious cargo.

Now she couldn’t get the phrase out of her head. What had he meant? All she could think of was her but that didn’t make any sense. He barely knew her and while he’d spent a not inconsequential amount of money on her, there was no reason he should be so invested in her. No, he must have meant something else. But what?

Besides, what was a poker run anyway? She’d overheard enough from the conversation the women were having to know they’d be going for a ride on the motorcycles tomorrow. It hadn’t been that they’d been excluding her, but she hadn’t known enough to contribute much.

“What are you thinking so hard about over there?” Savage’s voice startled her.

“What? How did you know I wasn’t asleep?”

“I can hear you moving around, babe. Not to mention you keep holding your breath, then kind of snorting when you start again.”

Her face heated and Donna could only be glad it was nearly dark and if he could see her, it was likely just her silhouette, or she likely would have died of embarrassment. She was snorting? How could she ever forget that and look him in the face again.

“Relax, babe. We’ve got a ride tomorrow, and I’d be willing to let you stay but everyone is going, and I don’t want to leave you alone in case that ex of yours somehow figures out where you are. I’ll feel better if you’re with us and I can keep an eye out for him.”

“I know there’s a ride tomorrow.” She ignored the part about Noah. Worrying about him and that he was surely looking for her wouldn’t help her relax or get any sleep. “What actually is a poker run, anyway?”

“It’s a group ride, with a bit of fun thrown in. Everyone pays a fee to ride and play. There are several stops planned and at every stop you draw a card, whoever has the best hand at the end wins whatever the prize is. Sometimes it’s part of what was collected, sometimes it’s an actual prize. I think tomorrow’s is going to benefit the kids, I’m not sure what group exactly. Lurch and the others will tell us more about whatever the benefactor is in the morning, as well as what the prize will be.”

“I’m riding with you?”

“Yeah. I’d say you can ride in the SUV with the other women, but from what I heard today they’re all riding with the men tomorrow. Even the prospects will be on bikes tomorrow, they’ve got a couple of extra bikes here that the prospects who drove our trucks up will ride.”

She bit her lip as she wanted to ask if he had to pay extra for her to ride along. They'd been over this several times and as much as she hated the idea of his spending his money on her, she knew protesting or arguing with him about it would do no good, and only serve to make him more determined. Not that she would mind a chance to ride with him. She liked the feeling of freedom that seemed to only come when she was on the back of his bike. In those moments / hours, the only things that seemed to matter were the man she held on to, the vibrations of the bike and the beauty around them. No, going for a ride wasn't something she would ever complain about.

"Will we be riding all day?" she asked, remembering how sore she'd been after the trip up from Casper, and that had only been a couple of hours.

"The run could take all day, or it could only be a couple of hours. I don't know what exactly is planned. But there are usually things to do at each stop, so you get breaks."

She didn't know what to talk about next, so she stayed quiet. That didn't mean she could keep her mind from spinning a billion miles a minute. Was he thinking about her? What was he thinking? Was he having second thoughts about her? About telling her he still wanted her, despite her being pregnant with someone else's kid.

"Babe?" Savage's voice pulled her from her spiraling thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"You're still thinking too hard. Come here."

She didn't know what he was doing but she felt her sleeping mat move beneath her. Her eyes flew open to find he'd reached across the open space between their sleeping bags, grabbed her mat and was dragging hers across the floor.

"What?" Before she could finish the question, he brought her sleeping mat beside his,

then with an arm around her middle, tugged her, still cocooned in her sleeping bag, against him.

“There, that’s better.” He wrapped one arm around her middle.

Now Donna lay curled on her side, him spooned along her back and his arm wrapped snug around her waist. His breath stirred her hair, and she couldn’t help but think how odd it felt. Despite the weird sensation of his breath along her neck, somehow her mind calmed and she drifted off to sleep.

Donna stepped off the back of Savage’s motorcycle, bent backwards and rolled her shoulders in order to loosen up her muscles before she took off her helmet and handed it to him to put away.

This was their third stop of the day and while she’d had no idea what to expect, Donna found she’d enjoyed the whole thing a lot more than she had anticipated. The other ladies had been nothing but friendly, making sure to include her in whatever they were doing and not acting like she was any different than the rest of them just because she’d only joined the group a few days before while they’d been with them much longer. Donna couldn’t help but be amazed at how welcoming they’d been. Far different from most of her experiences, especially with what had happened at the commune. She’d never really been accepted there, even as she’d gotten close to the end of the year she’d spent with them. And it wasn’t as if the women could have known what she was planning or that she would be successful in her escape. Or at least she had been so far.

She looked around, not for the first time, making sure there were no faces, other than those from the ranch, that she recognized. She didn’t know if after only a couple of days the commune and Noah would have given up looking for her or not, but the last thing she wanted was to be caught unaware by them if they were looking.

“I don’t think anyone’s following us, babe,” Savage said, coming up beside her and hooking an arm around her neck. “I’ve been keeping an eye out and so have my brothers, though they’re not looking for your ex or his goons specifically. It’s just a habit of ours.”

Donna frowned at him wondering why they would watch for people when they had no idea someone would probably be looking for her. Or maybe they did, had Savage told them?

“We always keep an eye out,” Savage said after catching her look. “We’re all ex-military of one branch or another. We spent too long where knowing what was around us and who might be paying too much attention could mean life or death.”

She blinked several times as his words sank in. They were always watching in case they were being watched or followed. What kind of lives had these men lived before this? Did they still need to watch or was it just so ingrained in them now that they always did it? She didn’t know and wouldn’t ask, but knowing that they were watching too made her feel better. She let her head fall back against Savage’s arm where it was still hooked around her neck.

“Thank you.”

Savage had hated seeing the wariness in Donna's eyes as she'd scanned the area at every stop. He hadn't seen the harm in letting her know that he and his brothers were watching for people they didn't recognize to be following them or paying the group too much attention. And while telling her they were all previous military hadn't been a lie, it also hadn't been the entire truth either.

The relief in her eyes was worth the tiny bit of guilt he felt at not being entirely truthful. Besides, if she stayed around, he'd have to get used to that because he had no plans to tell her about the Souls and what they were really into. Either what they lead others to believe or the truth. He didn't know how she'd take either bit of information, and on top of that, he wasn't willing to put his brothers' lives at risk.

He noticed that she hadn't flinched or stiffened when he'd put his arm around her neck and was glad she was getting used to his casual touches. He hoped it wouldn't be too long until she would welcome more from him, but he would take those cues from her.

They mingled with the other couples for a bit longer before it was time to mount up again and head to the next stop. Together, he and Donna went to his bike, where he pulled the helmets from one saddle bag and handed her hers. She'd gotten pretty good at putting it on, so he didn't have to fasten it for her and this morning he'd shown her how to turn on the radio between the two so she could talk to him if she wanted, or he could warn her about some upcoming hazard. He wasn't expecting her to use it once the group was back on the road.

“Can you hear me?” Donna’s voice came over the in-helmet radio loud and clear.

“Perfectly, babe. What’s up?”

“I wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?” He couldn’t help but scowl, even though he knew she couldn’t see it.

“For letting me know you and your brothers have my back. I know you won’t know their faces, but knowing that all of you are looking for people who might be following or watching too close, is a big relief for me. It means I don’t have to know every face. I don’t have to be constantly on the lookout.” She paused a moment and Savage wondered if that was all she was going to say or if there was more. “I don’t even care if you told them about the commune and Noah. I am just so relieved that someone other than me cares if they try to take me back.”

He took one hand off the handlebars, reached down and patted her hands where they sat almost folded around his waist.

“I haven’t told them, not yet. But now that I know you don’t mind, I will. I won’t go into too much detail, but it won’t hurt to have everyone watching for his face specifically. Though in order to get that, it will probably mean we need to get some information from you.”

“I don’t have any pictures or anything.” Her voice sounded as if she wasn’t sure what else she could do.

“That’s okay. I don’t expect you to. It will likely be things you already know like his full name, date of birth, that kind of thing.” She hadn’t had a phone after all, how would she have had a picture of him? Still, with his name, Gizmo would be able to find something with his photo, whether on some kind of social media or from his

driver's license. Savage didn't care, he just wanted them all on the lookout for the fucker.

"Oh, I can do that." Her arms shifted around his middle, telling him she'd shrugged, as if the information he'd suggested they would need was no big deal.

"Good. But I won't tell them until we're back at the ranch so you can relax about it. No one will ask you while we're out and about. We can enjoy the rest of the run and maybe win a little cash." He didn't know what kind of hand she was holding, but his wouldn't be a winner, of that he had no doubt. Still, he'd spent the day so far on his bike, with his brothers and the one woman who made him want more than he'd found to date. He couldn't think of another day that had felt this good in a long, long time.

Several hours later, he pulled into the yard at the ranch along with the rest of his brothers. He stopped and had Donna climb off before parking the bike in the barn with the others. Once he'd killed the engine and stepped off, she approached him and gave him back her helmet.

"Thanks, babe," he said and without thinking about it, bent to drop a peck of a kiss on her lips. It wasn't until she stood staring up at him with wide eyes that he realized what he'd done. "You okay?" he said turning away to plug in both helmets, so the radios would be charged for their next ride.

"Yeah. I'm a little stiff, but nothing that moving around a little won't cure. What's the plan for tonight?"

"Not sure. Probably dinner then I don't know what. We've got a club meeting tonight. That's when I'll tell them about your issue. You have your phone on you right?" At her nod, he continued. "Good. I may call or message you later so you can answer some questions for Giz, but it will probably be a laid back evening if you want to call it a night early."

He didn't know about her, but most of the day off and on the bike had left him more tired than you would think, not that he'd let that affect him. He'd be at the meeting and do whatever the rest of his brothers needed him to do. No doubt something to do with dinner would be on that list, since the men were doing most of the cooking this trip.

"Hey," he said as an afterthought, stopping Donna as she'd already turned and was walking away.

"Yes?" She turned around to look at him.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?"

She frowned back at him. "Yeah, but it's been a while."

"Interested in maybe taking a ride with me tomorrow? They said we're welcome to take any of the horses out."

She smiled, sending an odd flutter through his chest that made him want to press his hand against his chest to see if he could feel it from the outside, but he resisted.

"I'd like that. If you think it's safe." She lifted one hand to briefly cover her belly, letting him know what she meant, and it wasn't that she was worried about the horse.

"I'll find out and let you know."

"Okay. I've got to find a restroom. You be around for a bit?"

"I'll be around somewhere. I'm not sure the plan but I'm not going anywhere. If you need me and can't find me, call or text."

“Oh. I’ll do that.” She shook her head, turned and hurried off.

Savage reminded himself that she wasn’t used to the instant availability that most of the world took for granted. Sure, she’d had it before going into the commune, but she’d given it up when she’d joined. It would take time for her to get used to it again.

Thinking of it, he pulled his phone from his pocket and sent Kinard a text, asking if horse riding would be safe for her. Message sent, he shoved the phone back in his pocket and went in search of Lurch to find out what they wanted him to do next. He had no doubt there would be something needing done.

Donna sat at one of the picnic tables in front of the bunk house, wondering what she should do. The men had gone down to the other barn leaving the women here to do whatever. Savage had said they were having a meeting and he'd be back later but had told her he would understand if she didn't wait up for him.

She glanced around and noticed she was the only person who didn't have something alcoholic to drink. And it wasn't that she had anything against drinking or alcohol, but she didn't want to tell anyone why she wasn't drinking, and she wasn't comfortable with even a sip to keep them from asking. She did her best to act naturally but stuck to water or a soda as they visited and chatted. She didn't know if anyone noticed or not, but to her surprise, no one said anything.

She didn't know how long they'd been chatting when the men started wandering back, a few here and there, most stopping by the cluster of ice chests where the drinks were kept and helping themselves before going to wherever their women sat and joining them.

Donna glanced around wondering where Savage had gone when she felt someone step up behind her. Since no one around her said anything, she knew it couldn't be Noah or any of the other goons from the commune. That alone kept her from panicking. As hands settled on her shoulders, she couldn't resist the need any longer, so tilted her head back as far as she could and found herself looking up at Savage.

"Hey babe, how you doing?" he asked, something she didn't know how to interpret lighting up his eyes.

“I’m okay.” She found herself resting the top of her head against his belly as she leaned back slightly and continued to stare up at him. “Everything go okay?” She knew better than to ask what had happened during the meeting, but hoped he’d understand what she was asking. How had they taken being told about the men who may or may not be looking for her.

“It’s all good, babe.” He bent down and placed a quick, chaste kiss on her mouth before leaning back up and watching her for a moment. “You look tired.”

“I am, but I didn’t want to disappear on you.” She fought back the urge to yawn as he reminded her how sleepy she’d been for the last hour.

A soft smile curved his lips. “Come on. Let’s head back to the tent.”

“Are you sure? It’s still early and I don’t want to take you away from the others. I know you weren’t planning on such a wet blanket when you came up here.”

“I’m sure. Come one.” He used one hand on the back of her head to lift it back up right then waited while she stood and stepped out of the bench on the picnic table before taking her hand and heading out toward the pasture where the tents sat.

Several voices behind them called out some teasing about his leaving early. She started to apologize again but as she glanced at him, she caught him watching her. With a wink in her direction, he didn’t say a word but lifted his other hand and sent his brothers the bird without ever looking back. Laughter erupted behind them.

“It’s just teasing. And only because I’m the first of the night. It would be the same for whoever called it a night first.” He tugged her closer and wrapped his arm around her waist. “I have something I want to suggest, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to. It’s just a suggestion, okay?”

She frowned at him, wondering what he was going to suggest that she wouldn't like. "Okay..." she drew the word out as if it had several syllables as she tried to figure it out.

They reached the tent, Savage unzipped it and held the flap open while she stepped out of her shoes and inside, then he did the same, before grabbing both pair and setting them inside before zipping the flap back up. While he did that, she turned off the electric lantern he'd hung at the top of the tent, then sat on her sleeping mat, back on her side of the tent where she'd put it this morning while getting ready for the ride.

She didn't have long to wait, as when he had the tent secure, he came over and sat, not on his own bedroll but beside her on hers. Before speaking he reached over and picked up one of her hands, and just held it in his as both hands sat on the small gap of space between his thigh and hers. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before speaking.

"I want to make sure you don't feel like I'm pressuring you into something you don't want, but I think we should move the beds together." He lifted his other hand to stop her as she started to speak, then continued, "And I'm not talking just the mats like I did last night. I mean the whole thing. Zip the sleeping bags together. I wasn't prepared for how cool it gets at night and these are summer weight for the desert, not enough for up here. Together we'll be warmer. You can wear whatever you want to bed and while I can't stop my body from reacting, I can keep from acting on it. Just think about it a minute before you say no."

Donna scowled, wondering why his initial thought was that she would say no. Well, the more she thought about it the more obvious that part became but she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea. Still, she wanted to know why he thought this was a good idea.

"Tell me why? I don't mean convince me. I mean give me your reasons."

“The first is that it will be more comfortable. For you and me both. On top of that, both nights so far, I’ve woken up to you shivering and curling up in a little ball. If we’re in the bags together, we’ll share body heat, and you won’t be so cold. Not to mention that we can pull the sleeping bag all the way up to our necks or over our heads to stay that much warmer instead of my tucking mine under my arms to pull you close and hold on to you.”

Donna stared at him for a moment, then blinked but still couldn’t put her thoughts into words. She hadn’t known that he’d noticed that she’d gotten cold. Was that why she’d woken up next to him that first morning?

This morning hadn’t been a surprise as she remembered him dragging her over there before they fell asleep. But she had assumed that she’d made her way across the empty space on her own the night before. She felt like she’d been over these things before, but couldn’t be sure. She’d heard women talk about pregnancy brain. Was this what they meant?

She turned and looked at him, tempted to agree, but still wary. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll sleep in the sweatpants I brought, and you can wear anything you like, but please not jeans. Only because neither of us will be comfortable.”

She watched him for a moment, her mind spinning with possibilities.

“You think about that for a minute or however long you need. I’m going to take my things and go visit the bathroom.” He released her hand, moved over to his bag, pulled a small, zippered bag out and went to the door. “If you decide you’re okay with it, and you want to, you can rearrange the beds or you can wait for me to come back, and I’ll help.”

She watched as he left, zipping the tent closed behind him, then sat where she was for

maybe a minute, debating his offer. Then it popped into her head. What the decision boiled down to at its most basic.

Did she trust him?

That answer was instant. She wasn't entirely sure why but over the last couple of days she'd decided she did trust him. With everything. Plus, she couldn't count the number of times she'd wanted to close the distance between them and kiss him.

She was still blown away that he didn't seem to care that she was pregnant or that there was no chance it was his. While it would have been nice to say it hadn't changed the way he'd treated her, that wasn't entirely true. If someone had asked her before she told him, she would have said he couldn't have treated her better, but she would have been proven wrong.

Now he wasn't just helping her and making sure she was safe, but he was taking care of her. She pushed herself up off the sleeping mat and got to work as she told herself she could, and previously had, do worse in choosing which men to pursue.

She might be proven wrong in the end, but she didn't think she would be. Her gut, and something more, told her Savage was special.

“Y ou’re crashing early,” Sackett said as Savage stepped out of the bathroom into the common area of the bunkhouse. Several of the unattached brothers and prospects had set up some kind of tournament on one of the gaming devices hooked to the TV in the corner. They were taking turns at a first-person shooter game Savage had seen before but couldn’t name.

They appeared to be working in teams, at least for now, from the chatter between them. They encouraged each other, gave directions, and seemed to be battling a common foe. Savage seemed to be waiting for his turn.

“Yeah. Donna’s tired after today and wants to go to bed.”

“And you’re going with her?” Sackett waggled his brows suggesting he knew why Savage was going to call it a night with her.

“I’m going with her. Have a good night with all this.” He waved a hand toward the TV, and the men clustered around yelling at the screen. He didn’t bother to try to tell his brother that there was nothing between him and Donna but that he was caring for her. They wouldn’t believe him even if he did, and he had hopes that there would be more. Maybe not for a while, until she was comfortable with him, but she seemed to be more relaxed, more at ease with him every day.

He made his way out of the bunkhouse and back to the tent, wondering what he’d find when he got there. How had she decided? There was no point in speculating, he knew but he had nothing else to occupy his mind. Well, other than thoughts of her

that wouldn't help making her more comfortable, so he steered his mind away from those.

He reached the tent, unzipped it, and paused, still standing outside, his head poked through the doorway.

"Oh, good. I really think we'll be more comfortable and sleep better that way," he said when he saw she'd put the mats together, opened one sleeping bag at the bottom and the other on top.

"I think they're supposed to zip together, but I can't make it work." She knelt on the bags near the middle of the bottom, her hands on the zipper and frustration clear in her face.

"Let me try. Do you need to make a trip to the bathroom before we lay down?"

"Yeah, but I wanted to get this done first."

He kicked his boots off as he stepped inside, then picked them up and set them in the corner so they wouldn't track dirt in. "Let me take a look." He stepped past her and put away his hygiene bag before moving to take her place near the foot of the bedroll she'd created.

She moved, letting him take her place. He bent to see if he could figure out what was wrong. Before he had a chance to get a good look, her shuffling around behind him caught his attention.

"What is it, babe?" He looked up and twisted around to watch her for a moment. He wanted to see her face and body language.

"I feel like I should be doing something to help." She twisted her hands in front of

her.

Savage glanced around the space they shared and saw nothing she needed to do. “I’ve got everything here handled. You said you need to go use the restroom before we go to bed. Do you want to go do that?”

She stared at him for a moment then blinked. “I can do that.” She started for the door.

“Don’t forget your shoes, or your flip-flops and do you need your toothbrush or anything else?” He watched as she went back to her bag and dug out the small bag with her toothbrush, hairbrush, toothpaste, and the like, then pulled out the sandals they’d gotten the day before, then left. Savage shook his head at how easily she got flustered but he didn’t want to say anything to her, for fear of how she’d taken it.

From the way she acted, the jack ass she’d been on the run from when he’d found her had been a real piece of work and had done more than physically abuse her. She’d told him about the fucker hitting her, and he was beginning to think that the mental and emotional abuse she had told him about was only the top of the iceberg.

He would have to be careful with how he said things and giving her orders, at least until she learned to trust him completely and didn’t seem to be waiting for him to turn and slap her, either physically or emotionally, when she was least prepared for it.

Savage bit back the growl of frustration at his inability to find the piece of shit who had done this to the sweet woman who felt so good in his arms as he bent to take a look at what was wrong with the zipper. It didn’t take him long to find the problem. She’d laid the bottom sleeping bag out face down instead of face up. It only took him a few minutes to pick them both up, then lay it out right.

He had just finished zipping the last side of the sleeping bag and turned to make sure everything else was where it was supposed to be when he heard the soft crunch of

footsteps approaching. Savage froze, waiting to see what whoever was approaching would do. Thankfully, he was directly under the small light hanging from the top of the tent, so he wasn't throwing a shadow as he slowly lifted one hand to the small of his back so he could draw his weapon if he needed to. He slowed his breathing as options seemed to pop into his head as he waited. He'd have to reconsider leaving the light up there but, in the moment, he didn't see anywhere that would be better since the tent could be approached from any side and anywhere else it would be sure to throw shadows, revealing exactly where in the tent he sat and what he was doing.

"Are you still in there?" The soft voice that came through the tent made him instantly relax.

He took a deep breath, let the hand that had been held behind him and at the ready, fall to his side then spoke. "I'm here. Come on in." Unable to help himself, he let his head drop back as he concentrated on letting the tension that had filled his entire body drain from him.

By the time Donna had unzipped the door, stepped inside, closed the door, and turned back to him, he'd managed to push the instant tension from him. He hoped she had no idea what he'd been through in those few seconds.

"Did you figure it out?" she asked as she put the bag with her things away.

"I did. You had the bottom sleeping bag upside down. I got it all taken care of though." He opened his belt and pulled it loose from the loops on one side of his jeans, grabbed the holster on his pistol before it had a chance to fall. Then with his other hand pulled his belt free from his jeans, then set both aside. He put his belt on top of his bag and the holstered pistol on his side of the sleeping bag so he could reach it from the bed, just in case.

Savage turned back to find her watching him with wide eyes.

“What?” He knew it wasn’t the pistol. She’d already seen that, the first day, and she hadn’t seemed fazed by it. Besides, she’d spent most of the day pressed up against his back, it would have been impossible for her not to know it was there.

“Um.” She looked down at the floor, then muttered the rest of what she had to say. “I need to change clothes.” Her eyes flicked to him then back to the floor. “And I’m guessing you do too since you asked me not to wear jeans to bed but you still have yours on.” She blushed bright red.

Savage guessed that they both needed to change clothes, and the idea of doing it in front of each other embarrassed her.

“I do. We can do this one of two ways,” he paused and waited for her to look up at him before continuing, “I can get my clothes, step outside and change while you do the same in here.” The shocked look on her face had him stopping. “What’s wrong with that?” he asked, having an idea but wanting to hear her say it.

“But if you change outside, anyone can see you. How could you do that?”

“Babe, you do know I was in the Navy, right?”

“Yeah,” she said with a frown, “you told me that, but what does it have to do with this?”

“In the Navy, hell in all the branches, especially in boot camp, you live in barracks. I mean big rooms of bunks with a bunch of men. There is little privacy. On top of that you’ve got communal showers and eventually you learn to just not care. I could walk through the courtyard around the bunkhouse when everyone’s gathered around, like at mealtime, stark naked and not care. On the other hand, I know you do. So, if you’d like I can step outside. Or we can just turn our backs to each other, and change. I promise I won’t turn around until you say I can.”

She stared at him for a moment, and he wasn't sure if she was trying to gauge how honest he was being or if she was trying to decide.

"I don't want you to have to change outside. I couldn't do that, and I can't ask you to." She took a deep breath and let it out before speaking again. "We're both adults and I trust you. If I didn't trust you, we wouldn't be doing this." She swept one arm toward the sleeping bags he'd finished putting together.

"Ok. I'm going to give you my back then, when you're ready for me to turn around say something."

"All right, and you can do the same." Her voice shook just a little, but she didn't let it stop her from going to her own bag and pulling out several items.

"Babe, I already told you, I'm not shy. You can turn around any time." He didn't bother to mention that he wasn't taking off his shorts so the most she'd see is his back and his cotton covered ass as he shed his jeans and pulled on a clean t-shirt

D onna did her best to keep Savage from seeing how badly her hands shook as she dug out the shorts and shirt she planned to sleep in. It wasn't that she was scared of him. But Noah had pointed out every flaw in her body so many times that she didn't want anyone to see her. She didn't know if she'd ever get past it but for now, the best she could do was to stay covered whenever she was around anyone, especially men.

Once she had her clothes, she shot one last look over toward Savage before quickly taking off her shirt and replacing it with the one she would sleep in. This one was loose and long, giving her enough room to easily slip off her bra while staying completely covered. Once that was off and tossed on top of her backpack, she hazarded another glance back at Savage, then stood and stepped out of her jeans. Only then did she realize that even if he'd been looking, all Savage would have seen was from mid-thigh down. Her shirt covered everything else. For a moment she considered leaving her shorts off, but what would she do if her shirt rode up in the night?

No.

Shorts was better. She stepped into them, pulled them up over her hips and sat back down.

“Okay. You can look now.”

She spun on her butt and put her clothes in the pocket of her bag she was using for dirty things.

“You ready to climb in?” he asked.

“I will be in just a moment.” She zipped the bag and put it back where it belonged before turning to look at him.

“Climb in when you’re ready,” he said as he lifted up onto his knees and reached over her head.

Donna found herself staring at his bare chest as he stretched up and unhooked the lantern from where it hung. She wondered what his skin would taste like? Her face heated and she turned away, hoping he wouldn’t notice. She couldn’t remember the last time her fingers had ached to touch someone, but they did now.

“You okay?” he asked, as she moved to the edge of the sleeping bag closest to where the zipper was and slid inside.

“I’m good.” She shivered as she slid between the layers. Between the temperature dropping and the cool feel of the material she couldn’t help it. But it wouldn’t last long. It would only take a few minutes for her body, and soon Savage’s to warm the bed. She looked forward to not getting cold tonight. She fidgeted a moment, getting comfortable, then froze as she felt the sleeping bag behind her lift and heard Savage slide inside.

“You good for me to turn out the light?” His voice came from right behind her, sending her senses into overload.

“I’m good.” She stayed where she was, not wanting him to feel like she was too needy, but her chest ached as she wished he’d move up behind her and wrap his arms around her, like he had the night before after dragging her bed across the floor.

A soft click sounded, and the interior of the tent went dark. She lay there for several

seconds, wondering what would happen next. What did she want to happen, well other than his arms around her? That she knew she wanted. She wanted more but she didn't know how to ask for it or tell him what she was feeling.

Not the least of her fears was what he would think of her if she ever screwed up the nerve to tell him she wanted him to touch her. And more than in the chaste ways he'd touched her so far. Doubts filled her mind. Would he think she was a slut? It had only been a few days since she'd been in Noah's bed. Not that she'd been there by choice for the last several months, but she hadn't had a way to get away either.

No, she was better off keeping her feelings to herself. She didn't think Savage would hurt her on purpose, and yes, he'd told her he wanted her, but did he really? Or did he just want sex. Not all men were like Noah, she knew that. But sometimes she couldn't shut off her mind nor ignore all the things Noah had said to her over the last year and a half that she'd been seeing him. His words snuck into her brain when she least expected it, making her doubt things she thought she knew and leaving her feel like a foolish idiot.

"You're thinking too hard again," Savage said as his arm snaked around her middle and pulled her backwards until her back collided with his warm, hard chest. "Tell me what you're thinking about so hard." His chest vibrated against her back as he spoke, no matter that his voice was soft enough that someone standing outside the tent likely wouldn't have heard him.

"It's stupid." Her face heated and she was thankful it was dark so he wouldn't see her blush.

"That doesn't matter. I can't help if I don't know what's wrong." He fell quiet for the span of several breaths, and Donna hoped he'd let it go. Her hopes were dashed when he spoke again.

“Come on, babe, tell me. It will stay between the two of us, but I can’t help you fix it if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you.”

“It’s not that I think you’ll tell anyone. I don’t think that.” She stared into the darkness and wondered what she was really afraid of. That he would turn her down? No. He wouldn’t be mean if he wasn’t interested. She lay there for several long moments trying to find the words before she finally spoke. “I’m afraid.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper but at the way his arm around her waist tightened, she knew he’d heard her.

“What are you afraid of, babe? It better not be that douche of an ex of yours. I told you he won’t get to you.”

“No,” she said automatically, then stopped and amended it. “I take that back. I am afraid Noah or someone else from the commune will find me. That they’ll force me to go back with them, but that’s not what’s bothering me now. I believe that you won’t let them take me.”

“If that’s not it, then what are you afraid of, babe?” his voice was as quiet as hers had been, barely more than the whisper of his breath against her neck.

She took a deep breath and tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. “I’m —” she stopped and took another deep breath, trying to force her racing heart to slow, at least a little. “I’m afraid of what you’ll think if I tell you what I really want.”

“Wait. What? Run that by me again slowly because it made no sense the first time.”

It had taken everything she had to say it the first time, Donna didn’t know if she could say it again. She was still struggling when he spoke again.

“Let me see if I got this right.” His voice was a little louder but still not full volume

and much to her relief, he wasn't yelling at her. "You're afraid of what I will think if you tell me something about what you want? That makes no sense to me, but I'll know it's not about me. It's about you and what scares you."

The arm around her middle tugged until she rolled on her back, though he didn't move much, just enough to let her lay comfortably but still snug up against the front of his body. The hand that had been tucked around her waist came to rest on her belly, the gentle weight and warmth of it sending heat through her body.

Donna was thankful it was dark. She had no doubt he would push until she told him what she wanted. She was afraid of his reaction to it and at least with it dark she wouldn't be able to see the disgust on his face.

"Babe, I think you are one of the strongest people I know. I'm awed by your bravery and resilience every day. I don't know what you want that you think is going to upset me in whatever way. Well. I can imagine a few things that would bother me, but I hope you know I wouldn't hurt you. I would never."

Donna shook her head. "No. I'm not afraid you would hurt me, and I don't think it will make you mad. I guess I think it will make you think less of me."

His hand on her belly started moving, he made slow, gentle circles as if trying to soothe her. "Babe, the only way I could think less of you or be disappointed in you in anyway is if you're going to tell me you want to go back to that fucker. Everything else we can work with."

He paused, as if waiting for something, but since he couldn't see her face any more than she could see his, she didn't know what. His hand never stopped moving though, and for that she was grateful. She liked it when he touched her. Hell, she wished he would touch her more. And there was the problem.

“I don’t want to go back to Noah. Never. I don’t ever want to have to see him again.”

“Good. I don’t want you to ever have to see him again. I’ll do what I can to prevent you from having to, as much as you will let me.” His hand continued to make little circles on her belly. “Now that we know what’s it not. Will you please tell me what you want that has you afraid of how I’ll react?” His voice dropped to barely more than a whisper again.

Donna wondered why but didn’t want to ask. She was too busy trying to build the nerve to tell him what she wanted.

That lump formed in her throat again. She forced herself to swallow, once, twice, until it was gone, and she could speak.

“You.” The word came out as a whisper. She was afraid he wouldn’t know what she meant. But the hand that had been making slow circles on her belly froze.

He’d heard her all right.

“Donna?” His voice was louder than hers, startling her and making her flinch. He never called her that. He always called her babe. His calling her by her name couldn’t be good.

“Yes?” She couldn’t seem to get more than a whisper to come out.

“I want to make sure I’m one hundred percent clear on what you’re telling me. Did I just hear you tell me that you are afraid of what I think about you because you want me?” The way they’d been talking so quietly made it difficult for her to read his tone.

Had she been wrong to tell him? Her heart thundered in her chest and the lump seemed to be back in her throat again. She couldn’t swallow enough to force it down

so she nodded, even though she knew he couldn't see it.

“Babe, I need you to say it. I can't see you.” His voice was a little louder and from what she could tell, a little desperate? That was odd. Why would he be desperate? No. That wasn't the right word. But she couldn't find the right one.

She tried swallowing several times, but the lump in her throat wouldn't let her speak. Finally, her brain kicked in and she could think enough to grab his hand from where it still sat, still, on her tummy, and lift it to her face. She laid his hand alongside her cheek and nodded again.

“Yes?” he asked.

She nodded again, still holding his hand along her cheek.

“I don't know why you would think I'd think badly about that. I've already told you I want you. Just like I told you I wouldn't push for more than you're ready for. If you're afraid of that, I would never—”

Donna shook her head, stopping his rambling.

“Babe, I need you to talk to me.” This time the pleading in his voice was clear.

Donna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. He knew and wasn't judging her. She could do this. It took several breaths but finally, the lump seemed to shrink enough so she could speak.

“I know you won't push.” Her voice sounded raspy and hoarse, at least to her, but at least it was working. “I was afraid you would think I'm a slut.”

“Babe.” His voice had dropped to a whisper as he cupped her cheek and lowered his

head until his forehead rested on hers. “I would never do that, babe. I want you to know that. I know we haven’t known each other that long. You don’t know me well enough to know I would never do that. I hate that word and I never want to hear you use it to describe yourself again.” His voice grew stronger, but only slightly louder as he continued, “And it makes me want to beat the living crap out of that fucker even more. But at the same time, in a twisted way I’m also grateful. Because without him, and his being the shithead he is, I would never have met you and I’m starting to think that may have been the most fortuitous moment of my life.” He held her gently in the dark.

Donna’s heart seemed to overflow. She couldn’t help the tears that pooled in her eyes. And was again grateful for the darkness so Savage couldn’t see them.

“I’m sorry. I can’t always help it.”

“Shh. I know you can’t. I don’t blame you. I blame him. But let’s not think about him anymore tonight. I want to know more about what it is you’re wanting from me.” His lips pressed against her forehead.

Who had known men like this existed? Until Savage, Donna hadn’t.

Savage battled his need to find her ex and beat the ever-loving fuck out of him for the job he'd done on the sweet girl in his arms. From everything Savage had seen from her, she did whatever she was asked, even volunteering to help or doing whatever she saw that needed doing.

She and the rest of the women seemed to have hit it off. At least from what he'd seen.

But that wasn't what mattered now. It was the woman in his arms, who just said something he'd been aching, literally, to hear her say. She wanted him.

Still, he didn't know how poorly that walking piece of shit had treated her. And Savage would not be one more trauma in her life. He would continue to be gentle and let her take the lead.

"What more can I say?" she said after a moment. "I want you." She slid the hand that had cupped his palm to her face up his arm to his shoulder, then down along his side.

He wished he wasn't wearing the t-shirt he'd worn to bed in an attempt to make her feel safe. She seemed to feel more than safe. Now he wished her hand was on his skin instead of the thin cotton. Savage stayed where he was, his lips pressed against her forehead as he let her set the pace. If all she wanted tonight was a few kisses and a little petting, then that was all they would do.

He might spend the night with a bad case of blue balls, but he'd do it if that's what she needed.

“What are you thinking, babe?” He needed something to distract him. His cock was already reacting to her hand on his body, no matter than he’d tried mentally disassembling his bike and putting it back together he hadn’t made it past removing the seat before his concentration was blown.

“I’m wishing we hadn’t worn so many clothes to bed.”

Savage found himself smiling against her skin. “Babe. That’s something that’s easily rectified.” He moved away long enough to reach behind his head, grab a fistful of fabric and tug it off, then toss it aside. “There, that’s better,” he said as he lowered himself beside her again. He didn’t say anything about her clothes or that she hadn’t removed any of them, because he was letting her go as far as she wanted, and that would be where it stopped.

There was just enough light that he could see the outline of her face. He propped his head on one hand and used the other to trace the tips of his fingers along her jaw.

“What should I do?” Donna asked, her voice hesitant.

“Whatever you want. You had your hands all over me with my shirt on, I just made it a little easier for you.”

“But I still have my clothes on.” She sounded confused.

“I’m going to leave that up to you. You can leave them on or take them off as you’re comfortable. That however will not stop me from making you feel good.” He smoothed his fingertips down her neck, then along the bend to her shoulder.

One of her hands brushed his arm, as if she wasn’t sure where he was, then her fingers curled around his bicep with more pressure. He wasn’t sure if she was waiting for him to react in some way or if she was just becoming more sure of what she was

doing. Either way he wouldn't stop her, not unless he had to. He loved getting to experience her becoming more certain of herself. Even if he couldn't see her at the moment.

"I need you to tell me what you like, babe."

"I-I don't know." She stuttered at first, and he could tell from her tone and the way her skin heated that she was embarrassed.

"I'm looking for feedback here, babe, not instructions. You can do this. A simple yes or no. More or not there. Tell me what you like, and more importantly, what's not doing it for you. If I'm not quite hitting the right spot, I want to know it."

"I just want to make you happy."

"I'm happy right this minute. If we stopped right now and went to sleep, I'd still be happy."

"I don't understand." Confusion filled her voice.

"That's okay, babe. I'll show you what I mean. You just tell me if there's anything you don't like, and I mean anything. I'll be upset if I find out you don't tell me about something that does nothing for you, or worse, accidentally hurts you, do you understand me?"

"Yes." The hand that had been curled around his arm pulled away, leaving Savage to think he might have scared her.

"Babe?" He gentled his tone as he asked, hoping he could talk her back into the trust she was showing him tonight.

“Yeah?”

“You get to touch me any way you want. I want your hands on me. Anywhere you want to touch is fair game.”

“But what if you don’t like something or I hurt you?”

“Babe, unless you put my balls in a vice and squeeze. I can guarantee I will enjoy anything you want to do to me. Is that something you’re considering?”

“That wasn’t on my mental list, no.”

Savage thought he heard the lilt of a laugh in her voice. He lifted his hand from where it had been resting near her shoulder and caressed her cheek. “Good. Just remember. You need to communicate with me. I’ll do the same for you, but I need to hear what you’re feeling, okay? And if you want to stop, then we stop. To talk about something or to be done. It’s all up to you.”

Savage couldn’t help but remember what she’d told him about that fucker she used to see forcing her, and how she didn’t think of it as rape. He had no doubts. It was. But he couldn’t change it, all he could do was be sure she didn’t suffer the same treatment at his hands. And hopefully someday, teach that fucker a lesson.

“I can do that.” She slid her hand from his arm down across his chest. Her touch seemed less hesitant, and he hoped she felt at least a bit more confident. She found the patch of hair in the middle of his chest and seemed fascinated by the feel, her fingers kept moving back and forth, as if playing with it. It was different but he liked it.

“Your skin is so smooth.” Savage once more smoothed his fingers down the side of her neck to her shoulder, then he took it a little further and smoothed it down her

torso. He wished there wasn't the barrier of the oversize shirt she wore between them, he wanted to feel the soft, satin of her skin, but he would make it work.

His hand brushed against her breast, he cupped one, then the other using his thumb to flick across the nipple of each one as he did. She arched her back, moving into him.

"Like that huh?"

"Yeah." Donna's voice had gone breathy. If the simple touch had triggered such a reaction he wondered how she would react when he teased her clit.

"Are your nipple sensitive?" He brushed his thumb across one and noticed how the tip drew taut under his ministrations.

"I- I don't know. No one's ever played with them like that." From the way her breathing hung as she tried to speak, he could tell it was doing something to her.

"Babe? I have a question and there is no wrong answer, but I need to know, okay?"

The hand playing in the small patch of curly hairs in the middle of his chest froze.

"What?" she whispered.

"Was the bastard you're running from the only one you were ever with, like this I mean." Savage kept his voice gentle. He didn't want to spook her, he just wanted to know what he was up against. If the man would rape her like she'd already admitted he had, then would he even try to make sure she enjoyed sex?

She moved her head. He heard the movement against her pillow but couldn't see which direction.

“I can’t see you, babe. I need you to tell me. You don’t have to give details, just yes or no.” He continued to let his fingers caress and tease her breasts, hoping she would recognize that he wasn’t trying to hurt her or make her uncomfortable. It was just the opposite. He wanted to know if there was anything he needed to be careful of. She was silent long enough that Savage thought she wasn’t going to answer.

“Yes.” The word came out as barely a whisper, but she’d answered and that was what he needed.

“Did you ever enjoy it?”

“It was nice, but I liked that I was able to make him happy.” Donna’s voice got stronger as he moved away from what he thought she would call really embarrassing stuff.

“You make me happy just by being honest with me. But let me show you how good this can be for you, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Trust me, okay?” He leaned close and dropped quick kiss on the corner of her mouth, then waited for some kind of reaction.

It only took a moment. The fingers on his chest curled and she tangled them in the patch of hair there as she tugged him closer, turned her head toward his and kissed him back. The tug on his chest hair stung a little but not enough for him to bother saying anything. It wasn’t worth stopping her.

As their tongues tasted and tangled, he let the hand on her chest cup and play with her breasts, taking turns between the two of them and trying to give them at least close to equal attention. He made sure to tease her nipples as well as the rest of them.

Donna moved, and seemed torn between trying to get closer so she could kiss him deeper and staying where she was, arching into his hand to get more of that attention. The hand that had earlier resumed tangling in his chest hair fell away. He couldn't help but be thankful for that as he knew what was coming and wasn't looking forward to losing whatever she had a hold of.

After several minutes, she broke the kiss. Her head twisted away, her back arched, pressing her breasts into his hand as she let out a low moan.

"Oh, oh. Ooooh." After several moments, the tension in her body seemed to drain away and she lay almost limp. "What was that?"

"That babe, was your first orgasm."

"Wow. Is that what everyone was talking about?"

"It is. And it surprised me. Not everyone can come from breast play alone. I can't wait to see what you do when it's more than just that."

"You mean there's more?"

Savage was unable to hold back the low chuckle. "Yes, babe. There's more. Just wait." He leaned in and covered her mouth with his again.

Damn. This woman was more than sexy. She plain did things for him, and he couldn't wait to show her everything they could experience together.

It didn't take more than a moment or two for her to be just as lost in his touch as she'd been a few moments before. This time it was him who broke the kiss. He trailed his mouth along her jaw and down her neck moving down her body as he licked, kissed and nipped at her skin as he went.

Savage moved over her, letting his hands play down her body as his mouth continued to tease along her skin.

Donna marveled at the smooth and soft yet also hard feel to Savage as she ran her hands up his chest and over his shoulders. She wanted to touch more but not enough to stop him from what he was doing, as it felt so good.

Unfamiliar sensations raced through her, sending her mind spinning as he used his hands and mouth on her and moved down her body. He said there was more but what he'd done so far had already blown her mind. She could still barely think for the way he made her feel. And it wasn't over.

"Don't you want my clothes off?" She blinked at how her voice had changed.

"If you want them off, then take them off. I won't complain, but I can do everything I plan on doing tonight with your clothes on."

Hurt seemed to stab her in the gut. She had never known a man who didn't want to get her out of her clothes, well other than her dad but that would have just been creepy. Now Savage seemed interested in her. He said he wanted her, but he didn't want to take her clothes off. She didn't know what that meant or how to react.

"What's wrong, babe?"

It wasn't until he spoke that Donna realized she'd been so lost in her own head and hurt that she hadn't realized he'd stopped the amazing things he'd been doing to her body, now he hovered above her, she could feel his breath across her skin, waiting for her answer.

She didn't know what to say. And not knowing how he would react if she did tell him what she was feeling? Her stomach roiled as her brain scrambled to try to come up with something.

"Are you okay, babe?"

Fear made her freeze. She knew he wasn't Noah but her history with him had taught her how to react, and it was all she knew.

"No. you're not. Come on, babe, tell me what's wrong." He paused a moment then his hand stroked the side of her face. that did as much as anything else to draw her back to the moment instead of the fear that rapidly consumed her brain.

Donna took a deep breath and tried to let it out slowly as she concentrated on knowing that this wasn't Noah. It was Savage and he had never been as casually cruel as Noah had been. To her surprise, he seemed angered every time she told him something Noah had done in the past. Maybe that meant he was nothing like Noah. Not that she could get past the things that had become ingrained in her, at least not right away but maybe eventually, if things continued to be this good.

His touch on her face grounded her as much as anything else.

"Can you talk to me, Donna? Tell me what's wrong."

"I don't know that wrong is the right word, but something you said hit a nerve and I froze for a moment."

"What was it?" His voice was as gentle as it had been all night if not more so. "I ask so I don't do it again. I don't want to push sensitive buttons unless I have to."

She took another deep breath and tried to figure out how to put it into words. "You

didn't want my clothes off." Her face heated. "I don't understand how you say you want me, but you don't want me to take off at least my shirt." Her face heated again but at least he couldn't see it. "It made me think that maybe you are just humoring me, and it hurt my feelings."

"First, babe, I want you to have no doubt I want you. Does this feel like I'm humoring you?" He lowered his abdomen to rest against hers. She could feel the thick hardness of his erection pressed into her belly.

No, he definitely wasn't humoring her.

"Second, oh, hell give me a second." He shifted his weight where he still hovered above her. "Close your eyes a second."

She frowned, wondering what he was doing but did as he asked. The next thing she knew the light came on.

"Okay you can open them," he said as he moved back to where he'd been a moment before, hovering over her. "I didn't want to surprise you by the sudden light, but I need you to see me, and I need to see you for this." He settled back into place, his face maybe a foot from hers.

She let her eyes search his face, looking for some hint of what he was about to say. Of how angry she had made him.

"Babe, I know your ex did a number on you, so I'm going to do my best to be as patient as I can with you and all this. The first thing I need you to know is that I will never, never lay my hands on you in anger. You can trust me on that. And as a layer of security for you, if it should happen, and it won't but just in case it should, you go tell any one of those men out there," he jerked a thumb back toward the barn where they could hear the faint sounds of the rest of the club having a little fun tonight, "and

they'll make damned sure it never happens again."

She opened her mouth to question that, but no sound would come out. Then she thought maybe she shouldn't say it after all and closed her mouth but couldn't help the way her face heated again. When would she ever stop blushing at the drop of a hat?

"Go ahead, ask."

"Would they really side against you? For anything?" She wanted to hide her face but also wanted see his expression, so she ignored the need to hide and watched him instead.

"If I did something as stupid as hurt you, or any woman, hell yes. Just like I'd do the same to them. But the key here is I know it won't happen because I won't hurt you, not on purpose. Okay, babe?" He cupped her cheek, his touch almost feather light and waited.

Donna struggled to maintain the eye contact he'd started with. She knew he was doing it for a reason, even if it was really hard for her. Hopefully, someday she'd get past this.

"Okay." The word was a little more than a whisper, but she managed to get it out.

"Second, with very few exceptions, I will never tell you something that isn't true."

Before she had a chance to speak, to ask him what he might say to her that wasn't true, he moved his thumb over her lips, keeping her from speaking.

"I will do my absolute best not to have to lie to you. But there are things in my life and more in my past that I cannot talk about. Not with anyone. That's for your safety

as well as others. If you ask me something I can't talk about, or won't for some reason or another, I'll tell you that. Or if you like we can come up with some code phrase that means that subject is off limits, but no one around us knows what we mean."

She scowled, not sure what he meant.

"You need an example?" He seemed to read her mind, or maybe it was her expression. "From some of the talking we've done over the last couple of days I know you're an 80s movie fan. How about if you ask something I can't answer I say something like 'your ego is writing checks your body can't cash.' Or 'talk to me, Goose'."

Donna couldn't help the giggle that escaped as she recognized the movie lines and where they came from. "People would think we've lost our minds."

"Who cares? We're not talking for other people. We're talking about things between you and me. And it's what we know that matters."

"I'm not sure."

"Think about it this way. We're out with a group of friends, conversation turns to something, I don't know what, and you ask a question I can't answer, whether at all or where we are at the moment. And there will be things I can tell you but have to be careful about who is around, but either way for this example I can't say it when and where we are. Instead of saying I can't talk about it or later, both of which could have people asking more questions than the original one. If I just say something like 'talk to me, Goose,' or whatever phrase we come up with, then you know, without everyone else knowing and now asking more questions. Okay?"

She nodded, unable to stop the soft smile that started to curve her lip.

“Third. As for your clothes. If you want to take them off, then I won’t stop you, but I know you’re not entirely comfortable with things like that. I didn’t want to make you more nervous. Besides, after you told me you’d never come before, I kind of wanted to show you different ways I can make you come. I wanted to get you to scream my name. It would only be sweeter if I could do it with all your clothes on. If you’re good without them, I can make you scream even faster.”

He leaned in and slid his thumb off her lips just as he covered them with his mouth. He teased, licked and nipped at her lips before coaxing them open and delving inside. Donna soon lost herself in his taste. His every touch sent her mind spiraling out of control.

Savege broke the kiss, but Donna had no idea how long it had been. Her eyes drifted shut as he trailed his mouth along her skin to her ear where he spoke so softly, even someone in the tent with them wouldn’t have heard him.

“You taste like heaven. And what I’ve felt of you so far is even better. I love the way you respond to me.” He shifted so his hips pressed against her again. “Never doubt my reaction to you. You make it hard to control myself. But I will. To make it as good as I can for you.” His lips slid down along the line of her neck, sending a shiver through her. Heat pooled low in her belly. His hands once more started to slide down her body, teasing and enflaming her senses. “If you want to take your shirt off, I won’t stop you. But if you’re not comfortable with that, I’m good with that too.”

Donna’s hands went to the hem of her shirt, then she glanced up.

“But the light?”

“I like the light, babe. I plan on having my mouth on every inch of your body, sooner or later. Why can’t I see what I’m going to be tasting?”

Her entire body heated at that, and Donna wasn't sure if it was a blush or need as he lowered his head to her shoulder then moved down her body once more. When his lips closed around her nipple, over the top of her t-shirt, she almost came out of the sleeping bag. She'd never felt anything like that.

This man was a wonder, and he said there was more? She didn't know if she could survive more, but oh what a way to die.

Restless movements jarred Savage from a deep sleep. He blinked, wondering where he was for just a moment before the movements came again and he realized it was Donna. She lay curled up, her back to him, and seemed to be curled in on herself, flinching every few seconds.

It wasn't until she whimpered that he realized what must be going on. She was dreaming and it obviously wasn't anything pleasant. He knew better than to shake her awake. He'd done that to Maverick one day and barely missed getting a fist to the face. Remembering that, it only took a moment for him to decide what to do.

He rolled onto his side and curled around her, enclosing her with his body and his arms. After a moment or two she seemed to calm. Her breathing eased back into a soft, steady rhythm that eased him back to sleep.

When he woke again, Savage found he was still curled around Donna. She'd moved and relaxed. Now her head rested on one of his arms and she'd woven her fingers into the ones on his other hand. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd woken at some point. Not that it mattered. He lay there for a few minutes, wondering what she would have thought when she woke up to find him wrapped around her.

He wasn't sure he'd ever felt anything quite like waking with Donna in his arms like this. As he took it in, he placed a gentle kiss on top of her head and decided he wouldn't mind waking like this every day, but a decent bed would be nice. The mat beneath them made it a little better but the ground was still hard. He wondered how she must be feeling when she woke. She wasn't any more used to sleeping on the

ground than he was, at least not anymore.

Once upon a time he could have slept anywhere, and been grateful for a chance to get more than a couple hours in a stretch, and he could still sleep at the drop of hat if he needed to. But it was harder than it used to be, and he couldn't imagine that getting better as he got older.

Donna's breathing changed, letting him know she'd woken up.

"How are you this morning?" he asked, not moving. He didn't want to let her go before he had to. He liked the feeling of her there in his arms.

"Good. I slept so hard." She started moving and he loosened his hold to let her shift and stretch. Once she was done, and lay beside him, looking up at him, Savage found himself unable to look away.

Her hair was a mess and stood in all directions but somehow it, along with the slightly puffy look to her face and the lines on her cheek where it had rested on his arm, made him want to do things to her that her stomach probably wasn't up to this morning.

"Good. I'm glad." He wouldn't mention her dreaming if she didn't. She might not even remember it. He hoped for that. He hated the thought that she had nightmares and that memories of them haunted her. But what was worse was that maybe her memories of what had happened to her causing the nightmares. Neither thought left him in a charitable mood. But he didn't want her to see that, so he pushed his thoughts aside and focused on the woman in his arms.

"What's the plan for today?" she asked, seemingly at ease to be lying against him.

He hoped so. He liked having her there, and even after such a short amount of time,

he knew he'd miss her when she wasn't there. Not that he thought she was leaving but even after going back to Tucson, if she moved in with him and things continued the way they seemed to be going. And he hoped they would, then there would still be the occasion when he needed to be away for a night, or even several on club business. They all had club business that had to be dealt with, even the president.

Hell, that's why they were here. Tuck had needed to spend a year up here and while it hadn't been club business to start with it had soon become it when he'd brought some of the brothers up, then recruited more and started the new chapter.

The weight of Donna's head on his chest reminded him she'd asked him something. That's when he remembered he had to get up and get moving. He was quickly running out of time if he wanted to get something to eat before the brothers took their ride out on to the ranch. They were going to discuss operations and possibilities.

Not of the ranch, but club enterprises.

"There's the usual morning thing that I'm not going to name. Then the brothers are taking a ride out on the ranch to take a look around and have a little brother bonding time. We should be back about midday." He deliberately didn't name the meals, or mention food because he was afraid her stomach would rebel, and she'd go running again. "I'm not sure if there's anything formal planned for the afternoon. Is there something you want to do?" He hadn't heard back from Kinard about horseback riding yet and didn't want to offer her a ride if it wouldn't be safe.

She watched him for a moment then replied, "No, not that I can think of. How soon do you need to leave for this brothers thing?"

He checked his watch. "In about five minutes if I don't want to be late." He looked down at her and debated how much trouble he'd be in if he didn't show up and stayed with Donna instead.

No.

Better not to do that. because he knew his brothers and Sadist, Mac or even Lurch would come drag his ass out, not caring that he might be buck ass naked or that Donna might not be ready to be seen either.

He let his head fall back for just a moment. “I’ve got to get up and get moving because if I’m late, they’ll come looking for me and that won’t be pleasant for you or me.” He lifted his head, gave her one long, slow kiss that took ten times longer than it should have. Once he was able to break away, he forced himself up and out of the bag.

Donna sat up and reached for her bag as if she was going to get up because he was.

“You stay here. Go back to sleep, sleep as late as you want. There’s no reason you have to get up just because I am.”

“You sure? You really don’t mind?” She watched him. A crease formed between her brows as she frowned at him, uncertain. It took everything he had to turn back to his bag and finish pulling out his things. If he touched her, even to kiss away the crease, he’d end up late and then he’d have to beat someone’s ass for upsetting Donna. Not a good way to spend the trip.

“Not at all. In fact, most of the women will probably be staying in bed. There’s no reason they need to get up with us.” He tugged his shirt over his head before standing and stepping into his jeans. That done, he put his socks on, then gave her a quick hard kiss on the mouth before going to the tent door while she slid back down and settled into the warm bedding. “Sleep. Relax. You have your phone?” He waited until she’d assured him that she did by patting the pocket on her backpack where she kept it while they slept. “Call if you need me. Or I’ll find you when we get back. Okay?”

It took her a moment to realize he was waiting for an answer.

“Oh, yeah. Okay.”

Now that he had her reply, he opened the tent door and stepped into his boots on his way out.

“Have a good day!” she called as he rezippped the door, her voice sounding like she’d already started drifting back to sleep.

As Savage walked away, headed for food and coffee, hopefully at least two cups before they had to head out across the ranch, he couldn’t help the grin he wore. Especially as he’d remembered the night before and how amazing Donna had felt in his arms.

“Damn,” Sackett’s voice pulled him from his thoughts as he stepped up to the large commercial size coffee pot and helped himself to a cup.

“What?” Savage asked with a frown.

“You made it on time. The closer we got to go time and you weren’t here, I thought you weren’t going to make it in time. I was kind of looking forward to Sadist dragging your naked ass out of your tent. I figured you were so lost in that little piece of ass you picked up in Casper we’d get to have a bit of a show this morning.”

Savage set his cup on the board that made the makeshift counter and turned to face the man he’d called his brother for the last year or more. He advanced on the man, closing the distance between them, speaking through a clenched jaw and only vaguely aware that his right hand was balling into a fist and out again as if preparing to make an impact.

“If I ever hear you or anyone else refer to Donna as a piece of ass again, you’re going to have a hard time saying anything else for a long, long time. And that won’t be the least of your problems because you’ll be eating your meals with a straw for a while because I’ll break your jaw.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Sackett held both hands up in front of himself, as if showing someone he was unarmed. Savage knew that was shit, none of them were unarmed, but that wasn’t the point now. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“What’s going on over here?” Mac asked as he approached, looking back and forth between them.

Savage glanced in the direction Mac had come from and spotted Steele and Talon a few feet away. Had they sent Mac to deal with them because he was from the same chapter and knew them better? It didn’t matter. He turned his attention back to the brothers in front of him.

“Not much. Just setting someone right on how to talk about the women of the club,” Savage said.

“You say something about one of the women?” Mac turned to Sackett, one brow lifted. “I thought you had better sense than that.”

“I do. I didn’t say anything about any of the ol’ ladies. I just mentioned his—”

“Don’t say it,” Savage cut him off before Sackett had a chance to say it again, “or you’ll find out that I wasn’t kidding.” He took a threatening step toward the man who’d prospected with him.

“I wasn’t. I was going to say his girl.” Sackett still held his hands out in front of him. As if he could ward off or block a blow coming his way with them.

Mac's gaze flicked back and forth from Savage to Sackett and back again, the single brow never dropping as if he was seeing something interesting. After a moment, he turned to Sackett.

"I don't know what you said," Mac lifted one hand to stop the younger man from speaking when it was apparent he was ready to defend himself. "I don't care what it was, and I don't need to hear it. But I suggest you are careful about letting any of the women of this club hear you say it, or anything like it. First, they're likely to rip you a new one, then they'll tell their men, and we will all make you regret the day you were born. Got me?"

Sackett looked like he was going to argue, but only for a moment then he took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now knock off the sir shit and clean up your mess. It's almost time to gather up." Mac turned and walked away leaving the two men staring at each other.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrespect her. I thought she was a fling for the trip. I won't make that mistake again," Sackett said, he slowly lowered his hands, though his eyes never left Savage. "We okay?"

Savage gave him one last glare, then nodded once and turned away, going back to the coffee he'd just poured. He picked it up and took a sip, then deciding it wasn't too hot to drink, a longer pull from the cup. He went to where the food was laid out, found some hotcakes, eggs, sausage and more. He picked up a napkin, added a hot cake then several pieces of sausage on top of it. At the end of the line, he set his coffee down. He glanced around, but didn't see any hot sauce or salsa, so he used both hands to roll the sausage up in the hotcake, then wrapped one end in the napkin before picking up his coffee again thinking that it was his own breakfast burrito, if not a traditional one. He took a bite as he headed toward the horse barn where they'd been told to gather this morning.

Savage pulled the four-wheeler he'd been riding for the last hour to a stop behind several others as the rest of his brothers pulled to a stop. He killed the engine, following Lurch's lead.

Since the foreman and local chapter president had been the one to lead the group out here, a group that consisted mostly of the men who'd come up from Arizona. They were about evenly split on dirt bikes and four-wheelers. Most of the locals were taking care of the ranch chores this morning. Savage assumed that was because they already knew what they were about to be shown. He didn't know what it was but from what had been said, he knew it was club business.

"All right." Lurch stood at the front of the group; he'd stepped up on the seat of the four-wheeler he'd been driving. Now he looked out over the group of men, all of whom still sat astride whatever they'd been riding. "I wanted to get you out here so you can see some of the challenges we are facing. As you can tell, the land is mostly flat, though there are some exceptions. There are only a few scatterings of cover, either from the surrounding area or aerial surveillance. If we're going to use this place as a distribution center, for lack of a better term, then we need to figure out how to make these challenges work for us instead of against us. I'm asking all of you, as well as the local brothers, because we have all served all over the world. We've all encountered different terrain and challenges and one of you might have come across something or have an idea about how to set up storage for both live and inanimate cargo."

Savage scanned the group, all of the men who had come up from Arizona, except the two prospects. Demon and Boomer had been assigned ranch work with the locals who weren't here. The men with them who hadn't ridden up were Lurch, Ghost and to Savage's surprise, Malice. Savage didn't know much about that one, except that he'd been recruited up here, that Ghost had known him during his service and that he'd been patched in after a six-month prospect period.

Savage had been a little jealous, especially when the other man had been patched in before he had. Sure, it had stung a little, but the Tucson chapter had been around for more than twenty years, they weren't hurting for members. And as far as Savage had understood the referral system and shortened prospect period had been decided on by the entire club. And had been so short-lived that it was over now. And now that Savage had his colors it was less of an issue to him.

"The upside is that once we get our storage and distribution problem solved, we'll be able to resume product movement back to what it was before we had to scale back. We may look at expanding, depending on need, risk and a few other factors." Lurch paused and scanned the group. "Questions?"

Murmuring spread through the men, reminding Savage of a big flock of birds.

"What's the risk of someone not associated with the Souls would be out here and run across what we've got out here?" Maverick asked from where he still sat astride the dirt bike he'd ridden out.

"Risk is low. This isn't like the border country where people go off wandering through ranches. For the most part, unless it's neighbors coming together to help each other with something like branding, or a search of some kind, people are too busy with their own concerns to go wandering across neighboring ranchland," Lurch said.

Once more Savage was thankful they'd had enough vehicles that they hadn't had to double up. While he didn't mind having someone on the back of his bike, it needed to be the right person, and none of his brothers were that person.

There was more talk about the ranch, club business and how the two would intersect, but Savage's mind had turned back to the soft, willing woman waiting for him in his bed, or what served for it while they were here.

He couldn't help but think about how he'd only known her a few days, but he couldn't wait to find out more to see her in his place in Tucson. The roar of an engine, then another pulled his mind back to the present. A quick glance around told him the meeting was over, and from the way the others were turning around, it looked like they were headed back to the ranch. He didn't bother to fight back the grin that spread across his face as he started his four-wheeler and followed.

D onna didn't know how long she'd slept after Savage had left but when she woke it was much warmer in the tent and she didn't mind when she climbed out of the sleeping bags. She dressed and cleaned up the tent, straightening up the sleeping bag and folding the top down to keep the bugs out, then folded it in half so her side sat on top of his. This way it wouldn't take up the entire floor. She then looked around to make sure there was nothing that needed to be done inside before venturing out.

Stepping out of the tent, she stood and stretched then closed up and headed toward the bunkhouse and the rest of the buildings where people tended to gather.

She'd only taken a few steps when she realized she had to pee a lot worse than she'd thought. By the time she was halfway there, she wasn't sure if she would make it. She briefly considered heading out away from the buildings, finding a hallow and just going, but no. That would be farther away than making it to the bunkhouse. Maybe if it had occurred to her while she'd still been at the tent. But she hadn't needed to go that badly then.

London, Beth and Jailbait called out to her as she hurried past the barn where Savage had parked his bike when they'd come in. She'd waved but kept moving, afraid that if she stopped, she'd lose her battle. By the time she made it to the bunkhouse she could only hope there was an available stall as she pushed her way inside and headed straight for the bathroom.

When she'd finished using the facilities, including washing her hands and splashing a little water on her face to make sure she didn't look like she's rolled in the dirt this

morning, she went back out to face the others.

“Sorry,” she said as she stepped over the bench and sank down to sit. “I wasn’t sure if I would make it. I didn’t have time to stop.”

“No worries,” Beth said with a laugh. “Have you eaten yet?” She nodded toward the kitchen area. “There are a few things left, the things that would last. And coffee.”

“Not yet.” Donna glanced toward where the meals were served, wondering if her stomach would rebel again this morning like it had the day, she’d been forced to confess her pregnancy to Savage. And how would she explain it if it did? She and Savage had talked a little about it but not much. She’d told him she’d rather not tell people, at least not yet. Not until she was as far away as from here as she could get. She didn’t want anyone, even semi-local to find out, so Noah could never find out if he came looking for her. Savage had told her it was up to her. He didn’t see any reason anyone needed to know if she didn’t want to tell them.

During the discussion she’d assured him she would never try to tell anyone the baby was his, but she was grateful for everything he’d done for her. At the time he hadn’t said anything, and she hadn’t thought that much about it.

But something he’d said last night, after he’d had his mouth nearly everywhere above her waist and his hands had dipped into her shorts, had her thinking if that was what he wanted. After he’d made her feel the most amazing things she’d felt in her life, she’d been lying limp in his arms, wondering how long it would take for her muscles to work again. Savage had held her in his arms as if she was the most precious thing he’d ever owned.

“What are you thinking?” he’d asked.

“Wondering how long until my muscles work again and if I can do this to you.”

“Hold me while we drift off to sleep?”

“No silly. Make you feel all boneless and happy.”

“Babe, we’ll get there. Tonight, I just want to hold on to my girls and know you’re safe.”

“Your girls?” She’d been unable to keep the confusion from her voice.

“My girls.” He’d lowered one hand to rest low on her belly. It had taken her a moment to realize what he meant.

“But...” She hadn’t known what to say or quite how to say it. “You don’t have to claim the baby. I’m grateful for everything you’re doing but you don’t have to take this on. It’s too much. Besides, what if it’s a boy?”

“Then it’s a boy. But I have a feeling it’s a girl. And I won’t force you to stay with me, but I want you to know that if you do, I’ll never say anything but that she’s mine.”

Donna hadn’t been able to stop the tears that had overflowed her eyes. Her chest had ached, and she’d tried to keep him from knowing but Savage had pulled her into his arms and held her while she’d let it all go.

She didn’t know what miracle had put her in his path, but she was thankful for it every day.

“Hey, where’d you go?” London’s voice pulled Donna from her thoughts.

“Oh. Sorry. I’m not awake yet and my mind drifted. I better grab some caffeine. Food would probably be a good idea too.”

“Go, get what you want and come back. The guys will be gone a while longer so we might as well chat a while,” London said.

Donna pushed herself up right, stepped over the bench she’d been sitting on and went fix herself a plate.

More than two hours had passed before the men returned, whooping, and shouting as they rode what seemed to be a huge herd of dirt bikes and four-wheelers up to the barn. She looked around, unsure what she should do, but the other women just grinned and laughed as they continued to watch as the men settled a bit and put the vehicles away.

Slowly, the men began to trickle their way as each got his vehicle parked. Donna watched as they made their way to the group of women, went to whomever they were attached to and gave them a kiss, wrapped their arms around them or some other way of greeting. She couldn’t help either the surprise or the pleasure that washed through her when Savage stepped over the bench where she was, sat beside her and hooked an arm around her neck.

“Hey, babe, how was your morning?”

“Good.” She knew he was asking more than it seemed, but she didn’t get into the details. There were way too many people around for that. “What’s the plan for today?” She dropped her head back to rest on his arm as she watched him.

“Nothing big planned today. Sadist is going to be doing tattoos all afternoon, probably into the evening too, depending on who wants what. I thought we could go into town, if you want.”

She looked at him for a moment, wondering what he wanted to do. Was he looking to spend more money on something she didn’t need or did have something else in mind?

“Maybe. What are you wanting to do in town?” She looked at him with narrowed eyes, hoping he’d would understand she was suspicious of his motives. Not that she had any thought that he would do anything to hurt her. No, she knew better than that, but for some reason she didn’t understand, he seemed determined to spend money on her. And after his claiming the night before, she sensed it might get worse.

But was it really worse? Had she ever had anyone treat her as someone that was as precious to them as Savage did? She didn’t think so, at least not that she could recall. And as much as she knew she should encourage him to do his own thing, that he didn’t need to take on someone else’s problem, she didn’t think she could.

Because he was quickly finding his way through the defenses she’d tried to build. He’d broken through the wall Donna thought she’d built around her heart.

She didn’t know how to handle it. How to push him back out and the really killer part of it was that she didn’t want to.

Savage waited to hear what Donna wanted to do with her afternoon. He wanted to ask if she'd been sick when she'd gotten up this morning, but didn't want to ask in front of everyone. No. He'd wait until it was just the two of them to ask that.

"I don't have anything I want to do. There has to be something we can go do or see. I'm sure there's something unique to the area or if nothing else, we can find a movie, if you'd like to go see one."

Her face lit up. "I haven't seen a movie in so long. That sounds like fun. I don't even care what's playing."

"This time of year there's probably some kind of super hero movie and there will be something suitable for kids, too," Bonnie put in from where she sat a few feet away. "There are usually five or six movies running at a time. The easiest way to find out what is playing is to pull up the theater's website. It will have all the showings listed."

"Oh good. I wasn't sure things like websites had made it this far north," Savage said giving Donna a wink to let her know he was teasing. One arm still looped around Donna's neck, he used his other hand to pull his phone from his jeans and looked up at the theater. When he got to the website, he didn't bother to read them out loud to her but angled the screen so she could read it as her head was only inches from his. "Anything there look good to you?"

Savage didn't hesitate to hand over his phone when she reached for it. He watched as

she opened the description for each movie and read it before moving on to the next one.

“Watch the way you talk to me, or I’ll have to find a clue by four to use on you,” Bonnie didn’t seem phased by Savage’s snark as she gave it back to him.

He knew she had no intention of hitting him, but it was good to know the other woman had some sass to her. From what he knew of Malice, she’d need it.

“What’s going on over here?” Malice asked as he approached, bending to drop a kiss on top of Bonnie’s head before glancing around the group. “Am I going to have to bust some ass?” He’d obviously heard at least a little of the conversation.

“Nah, someone was just being lippy, and I gave it back to him,” Bonnie said then tilted her head back so she looked up at Malice, then bumped him with the top of her head when he didn’t notice. Malice glanced down, smiled at her, and dropped another kiss on her lips. “They’re thinking about going into town for a movie.”

“The theater’s not a bad one, especially for a town this size. You might want to stop by the Harley dealership while you’re in town.” Malice met Savage’s gaze. “From what happened this morning, I suggest you get someone outfitted before the trip home.” Malice’s gaze flicked to Donna before going back to Savage’s. “After you get back, tell me what you think of that mural on the back wall.”

“What happened this morning?” Donna’s attention went from the phone she still held to Savage. She glanced at Malice but looked back to Savage for an answer.

“Someone decided to get smart and say something disrespectful. I set him straight. It’s fine and won’t happen again.”

Donna seemed to wilt beside him. “I assume whatever was said was about me. I don’t

want you fighting your friends because of me.”

“No, babe.” He waited for her to look at him, but she stared down at the phone she now held in her lap, the screen gone dark. Savage gently took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted it until she looked at him. “No. If he’d said the exact same thing about any of these women,” he used one thumb to motion to all the women in the clearing, “the same thing would have happened. And if their man hadn’t been there to do it, one of the others would have done it for him. What he said would have been acceptable if he were just talking about some bit of fender fluff hanging around to sleep with a biker or three, for one of our women, it won’t be tolerated. All I was doing was making sure he, and all of them know, that you’re here to stay.”

She frowned, glanced down as if she wasn’t sure if she should believe him but then lifted her gaze back to his. “Really?”

“Really, babe.” He leaned in and gave her a brief, gentle kiss on the lips. “Now have you picked a movie?” he asked as he broke the kiss and released her jaw.

“Um. I think so.” She lifted the phone so he could turn it back on. Then went back. “How about this one?” She tilted the screen so he could see it.

To Savage’s surprise it was the latest superhero movie to hit the theaters. “Are you sure? Is it something you want to see or what you think I’ll watch?”

“Well, a little of both.” Her face went pink as she looked away then navigated his browser back to the listings of what was playing. “I’m not interested in the cartoon movies.” She scrolled past two of those. “And if we see a horror movie, I’d spend more time with my face covered than not.”

“I can think of ways that might be fun,” Savage said, one corner of his mouth

quirking up, “but we’ll save that for a later time. Keep going.” He liked hearing her reasoning. It let him see into her thought process and, he felt, get to know her better. Maybe after a while, he’d be able to pick a movie, or dinner or maybe a gift, knowing she’d love it. Until then, he would learn as much about her as he could.

“This one is a comedy and while I like comedies, I’m not in the mood for one today.” She continued scrolling. “That leaves us with this one or a drama.” She showed him the two remaining movies. “I read what it says about the drama, and it doesn’t draw me. Not like this one did. So yes, this is what I want. But it’s also what I thought you would like best of them.”

“Thank you.” He dropped a quick peck of a kiss on the end of her nose, then glanced at the screen again to see when it was showing and what time it was now. They had a little time before they’d need to leave, but not a lot. He glanced down at what she wore. “Why don’t you go change into jeans so we can leave? I want to take the bike.”

Her face lit up. “Oh. Sure.” He loosened his hold around her neck as she stood. He watched as she stepped out of the picnic table seating then started toward the tent only to stop and turn back. “I’m so sorry. We’ve been so rude. Would any of you like to go to the movies with us?” She glanced around, her face still pink and happy.

“We’re good, thanks,” London said.

“We already have plans, you go have fun,” Dana said.

There were a couple of other responses, but no one accepted the offer, which Savage was glad for. He wanted more time with her, where he could get to know her better, talk about things. He didn’t care if his brothers and their women heard them talking, but he suspected she wouldn’t want them around for it.

“You sure about making her your ol’ lady?” Lurch asked from where he sat, Kerry

sitting sideways in his lap. “My understanding is you only met her on the way up here. Or did you know her before?”

“You heard right. I found her in Casper on the way up. But I’m sure.” Savage turned from where he’d been watching Donna until she disappeared from view. He looked at the local club president. “When you met her, how long until you knew, knew she was the one?”

Lurch was quite a moment. “Not right away when I met her, but once I started spending time with her? It was almost instant.” His hands tightened around Kerry, then eased again. As if he’d squeezed her to show how much she meant to him. She grinned then leaned over and laid her head against his shoulder.

“Would you have done any differently than I did this morning?”

“No. I can’t say I would have. And I wasn’t questioning that part. You were right when you said if he’d said the same thing about any of these women, one of us would have laid him out. He knew that. I’m sure that’s why he didn’t do it. But your girl? You’d just picked her up a few days ago, in his mind she can’t be more than fender fluff. She didn’t know what you meant by that though, did she?” Lurch nodded in the direction Donna had gone.

“I’m sure she didn’t. I’ll explain it to her later. I told you before that she’s on the run from her ex. He was a piece of work, got them mixed up in some commune,” he used his fingers to make air quotes on that last word, “that sounds a lot like a cult to me, though I’m not sure about the religious aspect of it.”

“Finding out more about where she came from?”

“Some. I don’t think she’d trying to hide anything, it’s just that the more she gets to know me, the more she trusts me, the more she’s willing to share. That fucker abused

her physically, emotionally, sexually. If I wasn't worried about keeping her safe, I'd be tempted to pay him a visit."

"From the sounds of it, I'd be there with you. If you find out enough info, I might be willing to make the trip for you, after you're back home and safe." Lurch's gaze flicked toward the area where the tents were then back to Savage.

"If I get the information, I just might let you," he said before turning toward where Lurch had looked, having a good idea of what he would find. Donna was on her way back. He watched as she approached, unable to look away, not that he wanted to. As she moved, her eyes on her feet so she didn't stumble over stakes or tent lines, he couldn't help but watch, but at the same time he envisioned her round and heavily pregnant and wondered how it would feel if to have his hand against her belly as that tiny one moved inside.

"I'm ready when you are," Donna said as she reached him.

Savage blinked, and realized he'd been lost in the vision he'd painted for himself. He shook his head and forced himself to focus.

"Then let's go." He stood, stepped out of the picnic table, hooked an arm around her waist and tugged her close. Unable to resist, he gave her a hard kiss, then stared down at her a moment, wondering how he'd ever gotten so lucky. "Come on. Let's get out of here for a bit."

D onna sat beside Savage in the booth at the little diner he'd found after the movie and didn't bother to resist the urge to lean her head on his shoulder.

"Getting tired?" he asked, picking up a fry off his plate and offering it to her.

"Not really, just enjoying being together. I like your brothers and the others but it's a lot. Other than in the tent at night we don't get any time where it's just us."

"I know, babe, but that will change after we get home. After a while you'll be happy to get rid of me or to spend a little time with the girls. And they really like you, you know that, right?"

"I didn't. I mean they've been nice. They're not a bunch of mean girls, but I didn't think they actually liked me. They barely know me."

"And I barely know you, but I like you. I like you a hell of a lot."

She didn't know why but warmth filled her. It started low in her belly and spread until all she wanted to do was curl against him and enjoy the cared for way he made her feel.

"This has been really nice," she said as she reached up and helped herself to one of his fries.

"What part?"

“All of it. Time with just us. Not having to worry about doing or saying something that might embarrass you.”

“Babe.”

Something about his voice made her lift her head, turn and look at him. He waited until she was looking at him to speak again, then he surprised her with his words.

“I’m not sure you could embarrass me, not in the way you mean. You shouldn’t worry about that. I hate it that you worry about that kind of thing. It shouldn’t even be on your radar.” He swiped the pad of one thumb along her lower lip, slowly.

The gesture felt more like a caress than his wiping something off her face.

“You could strip naked and run through the club house and it wouldn’t embarrass me. It would make me hard. It might piss me off, but only because I don’t want to share. I don’t want anyone else seeing what I think of as mine.” His eyes narrowed as he watched her for a moment, then he continued. “I don’t want that to scare you though. I think of you as mine. But that doesn’t mean mine to force to stay. It means mine to protect, mine to care for, to take care of. But if something were to change and you wanted to walk away, I’d let you. I’d do everything I could to make sure you are okay.” He pressed his lips together and she wondered if there was more that he didn’t say whether he didn’t want to or couldn’t for some reason. “If you decide you want to be somewhere else, you can’t be with me anymore, you won’t have to run or hide from me like you’re having to do now.” He leaned down until his forehead pressed against hers. “I promise.”

A knot formed in her throat. Donna didn’t know what to say or how to get it out if she did. “Thank you,” she whispered after a moment. She felt like she should say more but words seemed to flee her brain. Tears she couldn’t stop pooled in her eyes. She blinked quickly, not wanting them to fall, not here. “I’ll be right back.” She scooted

away from him and started to stand. A hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need to use the restroom. I’ll be right back.” She couldn’t help repeating herself as she glanced around and found the sign pointing the way. Finding the way she headed in that direction, barely paying attention to the people around her as she focused on getting to the bathroom so no one saw her tears.

After using the facilities, then washing her hands and her face, she felt much better. Or at least more able to control her emotions and face the world. She was on her way back out to the table and Savage when she spotted him. She knew the moment he spotted her too.

It took everything in her not to let her panic take control and freeze her in place. Instead, she forced herself to keep moving and headed straight for Savage.

“We need to go,” she said when she reached the table. She didn’t sit, but instead reached in and grabbed the little purse she’d brought, looping it over her head like he’d shown her.

Savage looked at her for a moment. She didn’t know what he saw in her face, but his gaze immediately swept the room.

“Who?” he said.

“It doesn’t matter. We need to leave.”

He slid out of the bench and took her hand. “I won’t do anything, babe, but it does matter. I need to know who, so I know what face to watch out for.”

Donna forced herself to take a deep breath and be patient despite her brain screaming at her that she needed to get as far away as possible. Once Savage made it to his feet, she gave him directions to find the man she'd recognized.

"Is he your ex?"

"No. But he's one of the men of the commune. From the look when he spotted me, I have no doubt he's looking for me."

"No worries, I'll take care of you. Any idea if they're willing to make a scene or get violent?"

She watched his face as his eyes scanned the room again, stopping in the direction she'd seen Brother Jacob, then continuing. She wasn't sure if he was looking for anyone who might be with them or just taking in the room.

"I don't think they'll make a scene, but I'm not sure. They won't get violent as long as there are witnesses. But once there's no one around, all bets are off," she said, still watching his face. He wouldn't let them take her. She knew that like she knew her own name.

Savage's gaze came back to her face. "Come on, let's go." He took her hand and led her to the register. After he paid for the ticket, they went out to where they'd left the bike. "Anything else you'd like to do in town, or you want to head back to the ranch?" he asked as they approached the motorcycle.

"Let's just go back." Her enthusiasm for the excursion gone.

"I'm sorry they ruined this for you." Savage turned to face her, used the hand he still held to tug her closer then cupped her face in his other palm. "I'd hoped for a day of fun and just getting to know each other better."

“I’m sorry.” She tried to look away, but he didn’t release her face. “I’m causing trouble because of them.”

“No. They are the ones causing the trouble. They have no reason to be hunting for you like this. They had no right to try to keep you from leaving. They don’t own you and as much as I think of you as mine, I won’t try to hold you if you want to go. I hope you know that.”

A knot formed in her throat at the tender look on his face. “I do and thank you.”

He watched her for a moment longer then released her as he turned to the bike to pull out their helmets. He handed her the one he’d bought her at the last stop they’d made, then put on his own.

Donna had pulled on the not yet familiar helmet and was struggling with the chin strap when a voice startled her.

“There you are. Whoring around with a piece of trash, I see.”

Donna didn’t turn to see who it was, she didn’t need to. She recognized the voice as belonging to Brother Jacob. Savage would keep her safe, she reminded herself. All she had to do was finish with the helmet, then get on the bike behind her and he would make sure she was safe.

Instead of giving Jacob what he wanted, her attention and fear, she kept her attention on Savage. But he turned to Jacob, the visor on his helmet still flipped up, his face and the ire there clear.

“Are you talking about me?” Savage’s voice came out as little more than a growl.

“Yes, but I was talking to your little whore,” Jacob said.

Donna didn't turn, she didn't want to look at him. It took everything she had to stand tall in front of Savage, and not bow her head and cower. She knew if she were close enough, and there weren't any witnesses, Jacob would backhand her at best, or maybe use his fist. It wouldn't be the first time for either. She stood, frozen as Savage stepped toward Jacob, moving so he was between the angry man and her.

"You don't get to talk to her. If you have something to say, you can say it to me. If it's civil and not just a regurgitation of what a piece of shit you are, I might repeat it to her. But you and your rudeness have lost all right to talk to her."

"Did your whore tell you she's married?" Jacob snarled.

Donna winced. It wasn't true but she wasn't surprised they were claiming it. It would make her look worse and Noah look like an innocent victim.

"Sure did, and we're already working on the paperwork for the divorce. I'm sure we can get it pushed through quickly, considering the abuse she's suffered, don't you?"

"That little whore—"

"I'm going to stop you right there. You call her that again, or anything like it and you'll be too busy picking your teeth up off the ground to worry about anything else. If you have anything that needs to get to her, it goes through me. Don't need to get anything to her. And you can relay that message to the dickless wonder who calls himself her husband too."

Savage took a step back, not into her but just shy, as if he knew exactly where she stood. "Get on the bike, babe." He turned his head maybe forty-five degrees, enough that she knew he was talking to her, as if the babe part wouldn't have given it away, but he never took his eyes off Jacob.

Donna wasn't sure how to get on the motorcycle without Savage already on it, but she did her best, bracing herself with her hands on the seat, then pushing herself as far back on the seat as she could, so he'd have the room to mount, then waited. He glanced her way, but didn't turn away from Jacob as he moved to the front of the bike, stepped up and over the seat then started the engine. Savage only looked away from Jacob as he twisted the accelerator and they pulled out of the parking space, leaving him behind.

31

Savage kept an eye in his mirror, making sure the asshole who had followed them out of the restaurant didn't follow them again as they pulled out onto the streets. He clenched his teeth as he forced himself to calm down. They spent several minutes driving aimlessly, as he made sure no one was following them.

"Do you know his name?" he asked.

When no response came through the radio built into the helmet that he'd paired with Donna's new helmet when he'd bought it a couple hours before, he tried again. "Can you hear me?"

Again. Silence.

He reached down and tapped her calf, making sure he had her attention before tapping the side of his helmet, hoping she'd understand he wanted her to turn on the radio.

"Sorry, I forgot to turn it on." Her voice came through a moment later.

"No worries. I wanted to make sure you're okay, and then I have a few questions, if you're good with it."

He felt her take a deep breath, her breasts pressing more firmly into his back, then she spoke. "I think I'm as good as I can be at the moment. I'm not going to fall apart or start screaming. Right now, I'll take it. I want to thank you for stepping in."

He waved one hand to tell her that wasn't important. He'd make sure she knew he'd always step between her and danger later.

"I'm glad you're okay, at least for now. Do you know his name?"

"Just his first name. We didn't use last names at the commune. Everyone was brother or sister and their first name."

"That will make it harder, but even a first name will help narrow down who we're looking for." He paused a moment, trying to decide the best way to approach his next question. "Did you marry the fuckwad?" He didn't know how else to say it, though he did wish he could risk stopping so he could watch her face as he asked. But maybe it would be easier for her if he wasn't watching her.

"No. We never got married. He never asked, and I wouldn't have agreed if he had. Did you actually tell him I was already working on a divorce?" Disbelief was clear in her tone.

"I did. He was trying to shock me, to get me to stop defending you. I will never do that. I used his lies against him and added the bit about knowing you were abused to let him know that they wouldn't win whatever battle they start." He paused trying to find the right words. "I'm not sure what the laws are about common law marriage in Colorado but if we need to, we'll find an attorney and do what we need to do."

"I don't either. I don't know how I got into this. I don't know how it got so bad." Her voice trembled and he couldn't take it any longer. He pulled off the road and into the parking lot of a grocery store.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing is wrong, I just wanted to talk to you for a minute and I want to be able to

look at you, to see your face.” He scanned the parking lot, looking for somewhere they might go inside, maybe sit down for a few minutes.

In the corner of the shopping center, he spotted a chain coffee shop. He steered the bike over to it, then walked it backwards into a space between two larger pickups, hoping that would make it harder to see from the street, just in case they had been followed. He hadn’t spotted anyone, but he wasn’t going to assume he was better than anyone else.

Once parked, they went inside. They found a small table next to a glass wall. Savage pulled out a credit card and handed it to Donna.

“Get us drinks. I want a black coffee but get whatever you want. Get some kind of dessert if you want.” He was aware of her going to the counter to place their order, but instead of watching her, he kept his gaze out the window and on the street, watching for any vehicles he recognized.

Not because he was expecting to see one of the few people he knew in the area, but because he’d been watching traffic since they’d left the restaurant and wanted to see if there was a vehicle that kept popping up when they’d been all over town in the last twenty minutes. That would be suspicious.

He hadn’t yet spotted any vehicles he recognized a few minutes later, when Donna came back to the table and gave him back his credit card. Put it away but didn’t take his eyes off the traffic zipping back and forth outside.

A couple of minutes more passed, Donna remained quiet until they called her name. She went to the counter and retrieved their drinks. When she returned, setting his in front of him before she sat, Savage turned his attention to her. If they hadn’t passed by now, they probably weren’t out there. Hell, he was probably being paranoid anyway. As he turned to face her, Savage watched her for a moment, taking in her

pale skin and the resigned look on her face. She thought he was dumping her. That the trouble that piece of shit had dumped on her was finally too much, and Savage was done. He reached across the little table and took her hand.

“Like I said, babe, I have no idea about Colorado law, whether he can claim you were common law married because you lived together or not. But we’ll figure it out. We’ll find an attorney and deal with it.” He squeezed her hand, letting her know he was with her. “I’m going to reach out to a friend still in Tucson, see if he can start looking into finding us a good attorney. Once we get there, we can have a meeting with them. It would probably be a good idea to at least try for an order of protection too. In general, they’re not worth the paper they’re printed on, but we won’t be relying on it to protect you. It’s just to show that you want nothing to do with him.”

He didn’t like her so far away. He set his coffee where it would be safe then used his free hand to grab her chair and tug her close, so she sat beside him instead of so far away. Especially with what he had to say next.

“If he pushes the married claim, you may have to divorce him, even though you never married. We’ll deal with that. You may have to confront him in court. If that happens then he’ll see you, and it probably won’t be soon. He’ll know about your pregnancy, which could complicate things. I think it’s a good idea if we get a lab test done that says you’re not pregnant.” He moved their joined hands to cover her belly.

“But, that’s not possible, because we both know I am.” Her brow furrowed.

“One of my brothers is a wiz with all that computer stuff. He’ll be able to get one for us or make one. But I want you prepared for it. Getting free of him may turn out to be quite a fight. I want you to rest assured I’m in for it. I’m not going to cut and run because of a few challenges. You got me?” He squeezed her fingers again where their joined hands rested against her belly.

He didn't know what else to say, what else he could do to set her mind at ease on this. Some of it would just take time, he knew. She had to learn to trust him, but from what he'd seen earlier, when she'd let him step forward, when she'd done what he'd told her when he'd said to get on the bike, she was starting to. He could live with that.

But damned if he didn't want more.

By the time they made it back to the ranch, Donna's nerves had settled, and her stomach along with it. They had found her but hadn't dragged her back. Sure, they probably would have if Savage hadn't been there to stop Jacob, but he had and since she had no plans to go anywhere without him, at least not any time soon, she felt safe. Or at least as safe as she could knowing they were looking for her.

That didn't matter. Not here. Savage and the rest of the men were watching for them. They wouldn't let anyone get to her. Of that, she was sure. Especially after today.

"Did you guys have a good time?" Beth asked as they stepped into the common area after parking the bike.

"The movie was great," Donna said, not wanting to get into the parts of the day that weren't so great.

"Is Sadist still working?" Savage asked, tilting his head toward the bunk house.

"Yeah, he'll probably be at it another couple of hours tonight. He said he's got at least two more days' work here, if not three," Beth said.

"Cool. I'm going to step inside and talk to him." He turned to Donna. "Have a seat. I don't know how long I'll be. You should get comfortable." He waited while she sat then turned and disappeared into the building. She watched him go then turned and found the other women watching her.

“Kinda gone on him already?” Kerry asked.

Donna didn’t know what to say, so she stayed silent, but she couldn’t stop her face from heating.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed,” London put in, “we’ve all been there. Most of us fell far quicker than we ever anticipated and for someone who, at least on the outside, was the last kind of guy we thought we’d end up with.”

“They look rough,” Dana said. “And they can be hard when they need to be.”

“Like when someone they care about is threatened,” Sissy said, “or hurt. Then there’s no stopping them.”

“But they’re good men,” Dana finished, as if that was where she’d been going with what she’d been saying all along, and maybe it was.

Later, as she brushed her teeth and got ready for bed, she could hear the low buzz of voices in the next room as Sadist gave whoever he’d been working on instructions on how to take care of the tattoo and cleaned up his workspace. She let her mind go back to the morning she’d met Savage, he hadn’t been wearing a shirt and she’d seen several tattoos. At the time she hadn’t paid much attention to what they were. She’d been too concerned about getting farther away from Fort Collins.

Now though, she thought about it. She hadn’t spent any time watching as the man in the next room had worked, but she’d had to walk through the place a couple of times going back and forth to the bathroom, and now she wondered what might motivate someone to go through that. To voluntarily get stabbed thousands of times, leaving some design permanently inked into their skin. She’d known several people with tattoos but the few who she’d gathered the nerve to ask about them either told her they didn’t know, it was something they’d felt like they needed to do, or more often,

they'd been drunk when they'd decided to get something done.

She wondered if she'd ever feel strongly enough about something to want to wear it on her skin for the rest of her life. Well, they did have a way to remove them now, but no one went into a tattoo planning to have it removed.

She finished up what she was doing, then packed up the little bag with her things as she prepared to go back to the tent. As she turned toward the entrance, she noticed that the sounds from the other room had stopped. The men must have finished and left. If she'd been paying more attention, she probably would have heard them. But she'd been lost in her own head.

Making sure she had everything, she picked up her bag and headed out the door. She was half way across the main room, focused on the door and Savage, who said he'd be coming to bed soon too, when a voice from the other side of the room startled her.

"You're Donna, right?" the low voice asked.

She couldn't help the scared squeak that escaped as she jumped, then spun to see who had snuck up on her. One hand flew up to cover her mouth as she stood staring at him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you knew I was here." It was Sadist, still packing several things into a large bag that resembled a backpack but not one like she ever remembered seeing in a store.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there. Yes, I'm Donna." She forced herself to lower her hand and stay where she was, not hurry out the door like her nerves wanted her to.

"Do you mind talking to me for a minute?" He motioned to the table and several chairs sitting around it, as if he wanted her to have a seat.

Donna stared at the chair, wondering if she should sit. She couldn't help the way she glanced at the door, wondering if maybe she should just leave.

It wasn't that she thought he would hurt her, no she didn't think Beth would put up with someone who did that, but she didn't know what he would do. What kind of guy went by a name like Sadist anyway?

"You can ask Savage to join us if it would make you more comfortable." He motioned one hand toward the door. "Or I can have Beth come in so you don't feel like I'm trying to threaten you."

She glanced in that direction again then dismissed getting Savage. That he'd offered to let her ask that someone else be present was enough. Instead, she changed directions, went to the table, pulled out a chair and sat.

"What would you like to talk about?"

"Savage told us a little about what's going on with you," he said.

Donna nodded, she'd told Savage he could tell them whatever he thought they needed to know, even about her pregnancy. She expected he'd done just that.

"Look at me, little one." Sadist's voice pulled her attention back to him.

Slowly, she turned her face back to him, not wanting to see what he thought of her now that he knew her shame.

"He didn't tell us to be gossiping. He wanted to enlist help from the club. He needed to tell us why he was asking us to put ourselves and our women, at risk." His voice was kind, but firm.

After a moment she hazarded a glance at his face, hoping she wouldn't see contempt, or worse pity, there. She saw neither. Instead, she saw what she thought was compassion.

“We'll help, that wasn't in question, but I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things.”

“What?” she asked, frowning in confusion.

“I need to know what you're after here. Are you in it because you care about Savage or are you just looking for a way to get out of your situation.”

Her face heated, she wondered what kind of person he thought she was.

Sadist held up one hand to stop her as she started to speak. “I don't mean that as callous as it sounded. And either way, it won't change whether or not the Souls help you. No woman should be stuck in the kind of situation Savage told me about. But I need to know.”

She stared at him for a moment, opened her mouth then closed it again as she let his words sink in. After a moment she started again.

“When I met him, it was about getting away. How could it have been anything else? I was desperate enough to get on the back of a motorcycle with a man I'd known a couple of hours. But since then I've gotten to know him a little better. Not just the surface stuff like what he likes and dislikes but more. I know it's only been a few days, but in that time, he's shown me so much about his character. It's hard to believe, especially for me and given what I'm just getting away from but there is a lot to him that I like, and I think, given time, I could fall hard for him. He's so kind, so gentle, even when he has no reason to be.” She looked down at the table. “I don't know what all he told you, but Noah wasn't who I thought he was, and I knew him

for months before we joined the commune. At that time, I thought he was the one I'd be with for the rest of my life. I don't know if he was always that way or something about the commune changed him. I will probably never know." She took a deep breath and let it out as she tried to get her heart to stop racing. "I stumbled across something that could be amazing when I found Savage. I'm not here to take advantage of him. I've told him several times I don't need everything he buys or wants to buy, but I can't seem to stop him. I don't need him to spend his money on me. I can make do. But what can I do when he insists?" She shrugged, hoping he would see how helpless she sometimes felt.

It wasn't that she wanted him to feel sorry for her, but since he'd decided he needed to question her, she felt like she had to make sure he understood. She had just asked for a ride. Help getting farther away from Noah and the commune.

After today's encounter, she suspected that if Savage had done as she asked and just helped her find a shelter, they would have found her already before today. And with no one to step between them the way he had, she'd be back at the commune enduring whatever they had planned as her punishment for daring to run.

"I'm not worried about how he spends his money or even if you're sleeping with him. I'm worried about the club. He's asked that we get involved in some things that have the potential for long term consequences. I would like to have at least a bit of an idea that the relationship has a chance of lasting longer than the cost. I'm not saying we wouldn't protect you but how invested you are in this might affect our methods."

Donna frowned. She felt like he was talking around something, but had no idea what he wasn't saying. She was about to ask what he meant when he spoke again.

"Thank you for taking the time to stop when I asked. I'm sure Savage is wondering what's taking so long." He tilted his head toward the yard they had been using as a gathering space. The area where she knew Savage was indeed waiting for her.

A little befuddled at what he'd learned from those few questions, Donna picked up her bag and went out to find Savage. She was ready to call it a day.

“That took longer than usual, is everything okay?” Savage asked as Donna came back from getting ready for bed.

“Yeah, Sadist stopped me on my way out and asked me a few questions is all.” She stopped beside him but didn’t sit, instead she bent and kissed his cheek. “I’m going to go on back to the tent. You coming soon?”

“Yeah.” He caught her hand and looked up at her face, trying to get an idea of what Sadist had said to her. She looked a little confused, but not upset. Good. He might not have to come to blows with his VP. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. He just needed to know a few things. It was no big deal.” She bent low, until her face was only a few inches from his. “It was nothing. He was just trying to protect the club. I’m fine. Don’t go pick a fight. Come to bed instead. Come to me.” She dropped a quick kiss on his lips then straightened and walked away, not bothering to look back.

Savage couldn’t help but watch as she walked away, ass swaying with each step. When she disappeared from view, he turned back to face the table where several of his brothers sat. Movement in front of the bunkhouse drew his gaze. Sadist had just stepped out and stood scanning the area. Probably looking for Beth. Savage considered confronting him about questioning Donna.

“I suggest you don’t,” Mac said from where he sat on the opposite side of the table.

“I don’t what?”

“Go start a fight with the VP,” Mac said. “I’ll go one further and suggest you do just as that little girl said and head to bed. I have no doubt she’s waiting for you. And if I read the look on her face, and her body language right, she ain’t got no clothes on while she waits.”

Savage’s gaze left Sadist in an instant and landed on Mac, at the same time, his dick twitched and started to stiffen. Was Mac right? “What makes you think so?”

Mac lifted one brow and stared at him a moment. “This ain’t my first trip around the block, boy. And Elyse isn’t the first woman I’ve been with. I know what it looks like when a woman is flirting, even one without a lot of experience tempting her man. You’re little girl? She had that look.”

Savage wasn’t sure how he felt about his brother calling Donna ‘little girl’, but it was better than piece of ass like Sackett had used, and he knew Mac, if he called her ‘little girl’, he had no interest in her. Not that he would anyway. Savage had seen how gone Mac was on Elyse. Neither one looked at anyone else.

Now he turned and stared into the darkness where she’d gone. His pants getting tighter with every breath.

Mac was right. She wasn’t upset. There was no reason to have words with the VP. Especially not when he had a warm woman waiting on him.

“You’re right. I’m going to bed.” He ignored the catcalls and jeering from some of the brothers, mostly the few single men, and headed for the tent.

“Babe?” he called out when he was still several steps away from the tent. The trip hadn’t taken more than a couple of minutes, but it was more than enough time that he

wished he was wearing nearly anything but jeans. He adjusted his now erect cock as he took the last couple of steps.

“Yeah?” Donna’s voice came back.

“Just wanted to let you know it was me.” He reached the tent and unzipped the doorway. “I didn’t want to scare you when I let myself in.” He toed off his boots and stepped inside in just his socks, just like he did every time. Then moved both his boots and her shoes inside so no critters climbed inside overnight.

Calm down, he thought to his dick as he zipped them inside. When he turned around and spotted Donna for the first time, he felt like the air had been knocked from his chest. She sat inside the sleeping bag, the top side tucked under her arms, but it was clear she had no shirt on under it. He didn’t know if she wore anything on the bottom, but he was about to find out.

“You sure this is what you want, babe?” he asked before moving from next to the door.

She didn’t say anything, just nodded.

“I need the words, babe. I need to hear you say you want this.”

“I—” She paused, swallowed, and tried again. “I want this. I want you.” Her gaze dropped from his face to the bed in front of her. “Last night you showed me what it feels like to come. Now I want you to show me what it feels like when we do it together.”

He hadn’t thought it possible, but his cock got even harder, making his jeans even more uncomfortable.

“I’d like that too, babe, but I wanted to make sure you were ready. You’ve been through enough. I didn’t want to be another regret.”

Her fingers tangled together in her lap. Savage remained where he was, waiting to see what she wanted to say but was having a hard time getting out.

“I don’t think that’s possible.” She paused and lifted her gaze to his. “I think if everything fell apart tomorrow, and I never saw you again. I’d be sorry for that, but never regret meeting you. I’ll always be thankful that you were there when I needed help and that you stepped between me and the men looking to hurt me. That’s something I’m not sure I could ever forget. The only person who’s ever done that for me before was my dad. And he’s been too far away to do that for a while now.”

Savage found himself moving to her side and going down on one knee. “I want to be there for you. I want to be the one to step between you and any threat. I want to be your shield from the world.” He reached up and cupped her cheek. “I can’t say what will happen tomorrow, or a week from now, or a year. But I want to be there. I want to see this little one born.” He let his hand drop to rest on her belly. “I want to see her grow. I want to be the man who teaches her how to expect to be treated and how to throw a punch if she needs to defend herself.” He searched her face, looking for any clue what she might be thinking.

“I want that too, but you’re thinking too much.” She leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

It took everything in him not to move over her, push her back until she lay beneath him and take control of the kiss. Instead, he coaxed her mouth open and spent longer than he should have tasting her.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” she said, her voice breathy, when he finally pulled away.

“I am, but I’m sure you know how to fix that.” He shrugged out of his kutte, folded it, and set it next to his bag. He might not be putting on his sweats tonight, but he would still need in the bag, especially if she got what she wanted. And he planned to give it to her.

Before he’d turned back from setting down his vest, her hands tugged at the bottom of his t-shirt. He grabbed the back of the collar and tugged it over his head. Her hands slid up his stomach and chest before he’d tossed his shirt aside.

When her hands went to his waist and started fumbling with the button of his jeans, he covered them with his.

“Not yet, babe. If you do that, things will be over too soon. I haven’t waited this long not to get to taste all of you.” He crawled from where he knelt over her until he was on his side of the sleeping bag and bent to his bag. “Let me grab something then I’m all yours, babe.”

He rooted around until he found the box of condoms he’d packed in Tucson, just in case. He hadn’t planned on using them, at least not for what they were intended for, but he’d learned long ago to always be prepared, and they had so many uses. He tossed the box next to his pillow then turned back to Donna.

She lay staring up at him, her hair spread across the pillow and her eyes wide as she watched him. He liked the way she watched him. It made him feel ten feet tall and bulletproof.

“You sure you want this? I’m giving another chance to change your mind. But it’s not your last chance. All you have to do, at any point, is say no. I’ll stop and leave you alone, okay?” He kept his eyes on hers, making sure she understood. That fuckwad of an ex may not have taken no for an answer, but he was better than that. He wouldn’t force himself on a woman who didn’t want him.

Instead of saying anything, she lifted one hand, caressed it down his chest and stomach until she reached the waistband of his jeans.

“Shut up and come here.” She used her grip on his jeans to tug him down beside her. “I may not know everything, but I know what I’ve enjoyed so far.” She lifted her head and torso enough to press her lips against his.

The taste of her swiftly went to his head. He opened his mouth against hers, coaxing her to participate as he tasted her, then broke the kiss and trailed his mouth along her jaw, then down her neck. He let his hands play lightly along her skin. Easing the thick layer of covering back as he moved down her body, kissing and worshiping every inch as he revealed it.

When he got to her breasts, he made sure to give them equal attention. He licked, sucked, and eventually bit gently at the sensitive tips, watching her reactions for cues as to what she liked and what didn’t do anything for her.

“Oh, oh, oh!”

Her cries were music to his ears. In a way, it made him glad that the fucknugget that was her ex had been so pitifully inadequate in bed. He hadn’t given her enough pleasure to have any reason to make her silence her natural reactions. And Savage loved hearing them. He loved hearing every bit of how he made her feel.

He teased and played with her breasts until her voice had gone breathy. Her hands tangled in his hair, and she squirmed against him. He could tell from the way she moved, her husky pleas that she needed more but didn’t know what. She knew he could give her what she needed, but she didn’t know how to get there.

He let his hands slide farther down her body, easing the sleeping bag down her body. When one hand reached the apex of her thighs and dipped between them, he found

her slick and hot. Her hips bucked, as his finger brushed her clit, and a whimper of need escaped her lips.

Savage eased her thighs apart, then lifted her legs free of the bedding, at the same time he worked his way down her belly, giving light kisses and nips with his teeth as he made his way to the treasure just waiting for him.

D onna's head swam. She searched for what to say but the flood of sensations Savage sent through her pushed all sane thought from her head. Hell, it pushed all ability to think from her head.

His hands moving down her body didn't surprise her. He'd done that the night before, when he'd shown her just how amazing she could feel, when touched by the right person. But when he'd followed the same path with his mouth, she'd tried to get him to stop, to push him away as he trailed his lips down to her belly button and past it.

"The light, shouldn't we turn it off?" she asked.

"Not a chance. I want to see you. Watch you as you come apart around me. I want to see every thought across your face."

Her face heated as his fingers parted her most intimate place, but she didn't know what to do. How could he look at her there? Like that? When a rush of chilled air brushed across her skin, and every nerve in her body seemed to sit up and pay attention. A shiver shook her entire body as sensation after sensation swamped her senses.

Not knowing what else to do, she found her hands fisting in the blanket beneath her. A cry of surprise and pleasure ripped from her throat as Savage's mouth closed over her core. His tongue danced over parts of her she'd barely known existed, much less that they could make her lose all sense of time and place. Her muscles tensed. Her mind went blank. Pleasure more intense than she'd ever known flooded her senses,

turning the world white.

Unlike the night before when Savage had backed off and let her come down, this time he didn't stop what he was doing, instead, he continued. When she once more became aware of what was happening, he'd eased back a little, but still licked and sucked a place where she never thought anyone would ever put their mouth.

She didn't know how he seemed to know she'd come down from the peak of the pleasure but some how he did. He slipped what felt like two fingers deep inside her. She couldn't help but groan at how full she felt as she stretched around him. Then his tongue flicked back and forth over that same bundle of nerves he'd hit last night. He did something with his hand inside her, brushed against something no one had ever touched before, causing her to jerk and twitch as the world seemed to disappear. All that existed was her and Savage and what he was doing to her.

This time she wasn't sure if she blacked out or if everything was just so overwhelming but as her body relaxed, she realized he'd moved. Savage's face now hovered over her. His gaze searching her face.

"You good?" His voice was low and husky.

She couldn't speak, but nodded.

"Good." He lowered his head and kissed her.

Donna didn't hesitate to open her lips and let him dip inside. She tasted herself on him, and found she liked the unfamiliar, but tangy flavor. His hands roamed down her body, caressing and squeezing until she was aching and ready to beg for something, she wasn't sure what, but she needed more. How could she need more after what he'd already made her feel? She didn't know and couldn't form the words to ask.

She was so lost to everything but the sensations, the feelings he was giving her that when he pulled away, even for a moment, her brain only functioned enough to know he was gone, and she wanted him back. Now.

She heard a cry of need, and it took her a moment to realize it had come from her. Before she could figure out where Savage had gone, he was back. His face hovering over hers. She reached for him, wanting nothing more than the amazing way he made her feel to continue. She wanted to feel him pressed against her, the wonderful sensation of peace he brought just with his presence. And she knew they weren't done yet because while she'd never had an orgasm until Savage, he wasn't the first she'd had sex with. She wouldn't be in this situation if he was.

She felt him line himself up with her center and couldn't help but wonder if maybe there was more to this part too. More than Noah had bothered to give her.

Slowly, as if afraid to hurt her, he pushed inside. The glorious feeling of being so full, yet needing something more, left her breathless.

“Babe.”

She didn't know if he was begging her for something or if it was a prayer, and she didn't care. All she knew was she didn't want him to stop. She needed more.

Before she was aware of what she was doing, her arms found themselves wrapped around his body. She pulled him down, needing to touch him. When he was close enough, she kissed him, pouring every aching desire she had into the simple contact.

His hips moved away, causing him to pull out until only his tip remained inside her. She knew this was how it worked, still, she whimpered the loss into her kiss.

Donna didn't have long to wait, because he thrust back into her, this time sinking all

the way inside. An intense wave of pleasure had her throwing her head back, a wordless cry erupting from her as her fingers curled into his back.

Her body seemed to clamp down around him, but he never stopped moving. Every thrust seemed to drive her pleasure higher, higher, higher until she would have sworn she was somewhere among the stars. Then everything exploded and she lost track of time as she seemed to float, happy and sated, among the stars.

“What’s your first name?” Donna’s voice pulled Savage from his hazy afterglow.

He lay on top of the sleeping bag, staring up at the top of the tent, the light still on and Donna curled against his side. He’d only recently regained the ability to breathe normally, and it wasn’t that he minded talking. He loved laying here in the dark, talking to her, but the question wasn’t one he’d expected her to ask.

“Wait, what?” He twisted his head to look at her face where it rested on his shoulder.

“What’s your first name? I was thinking about it, and I know everyone calls you Savage and that it’s your last name, but I realized I don’t know your first name.”

He frowned, wondering where the hell all this had come from. He’d been floating in a beautiful sea of contentment, and she’d been thinking? How had she been able to think after the number of times she’d come, and so hard that last one had felt like a tight fist around his cock?

“Thomas.”

“Thomas,” she repeated, her voice soft.

He liked the sound of the name only his mother used anymore coming from her lips.

“I like it, it’s a good name.” Her nose crinkled, it was cute and made him want to see it more often. “But it doesn’t feel right. Maybe I’m just used to Savage. Maybe I just

need to find the right name.”

“The right name?” He wondered again what she was thinking.

A shiver ran through her, making him realize they were still lying on top of the sleeping bag, not inside it. He hated to move but he hated her being cold more.

Savage forced himself to stir. It only took him a couple of moments to clean her up with a wet wipe from the pack he kept in his bag, then tuck her into bed. He disposed of the condom and slid in beside her, and turned off the lamp. He settled in, enjoying the feeling as she curled up against his side, placing her head back on his shoulder as if he hadn’t disturbed them. Somehow, this was even better than it had been the night before. Maybe because tonight there was no clothing between them. Instead, they lay naked in each other’s arms.

“What was that you were saying about the right name?” he asked once they’d settled back into place.

“I don’t know. You never call me by my name. I was thinking maybe I need a name for you. I thought maybe your given name, but that doesn’t feel right. I’ll have to keep thinking about it.”

“I use your name,” he said, scowling into the dark. He knew he used her name. Yeah, he liked to call her babe, but he thought she liked it.

“You do once in a while, when you’re trying to get my attention or draw me out of myself. When everything is good, you call me babe.”

“I like calling you babe. I thought you liked it too. I can stop if you’d rather I use your name.”

“No. I do like it. I don’t want you to stop. I like the feeling that you have a name for me that you don’t use with someone else.” She snuggled a little closer, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder. “Now, if you called all women babe, then we’d have a problem.”

He was quiet a moment as he thought about it. When was the last time he’d called someone babe, to their face? He couldn’t recall. Had it been Gina? His high school girlfriend? The one who had sworn she would wait for him to get out of boot camp, then they could get married, but hadn’t been able to stay out of someone else’s bed for even seven weeks?

No. He’d called her baby. Close, but not babe.

“No, not all women,” he said. “In fact, I can’t recall ever calling anyone babe, at least not like I do you. I might have made an off-hand comment using the word. Like fuck, that chick’s a babe, when talking to someone, but I’ve never used it like I do with you.”

“Good.” Her voice had gone husky, and her breathing was slowing. She would be sleeping soon. Knowing that sent a warm feeling through him. “I guess I won’t have to kill you then.”

Savage couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face, even lying here in the dark, at the idea of her killing him. He had no doubt that given the right motivation, she could raise holy hell. That in the future, she could and would make his life miserable, at least once in a while. But that’s what life with someone was about. Taking the bad with the good, right?

Wait a minute.

He almost sat up straight, as the direction his thought had gone struck him. The only

thing that stopped him was the even breathing coming from where Donna lay, telling him she'd fallen asleep. He didn't want to wake her, even to demand to himself when he'd started thinking about forever with her.

But was forever that far of leap after he'd committed to helping her with the baby? He thought through the progression and reasoned through his thoughts until he relaxed once more, then turned his attention back to the woman in his arms. The soft huffs of her breathing soothed him until he drifted off to sleep, wondering not for the first time if the baby she carried was a boy or a girl and how soon he could have her on his bike.

Not that he would ever endanger her. He wanted nothing more than to keep her safe from everything harsh in the world.

Damn. He wondered, when had his focus in life changed from his next ride, his next fuck, and having a little fun? Then he knew. Not the moment he'd seen the tiny bit of a woman in his arms, but when he'd held her, sick and terrified and she'd told him she was pregnant with her ex-dickfucker, rapist's baby and didn't know what to do.

Two days later, Donna was in the courtyard where everyone had been gathering when they didn't have something else they were doing, talking with several other women. They were talking about the trip back to Tucson, how long they thought it would take and stops they wanted to make. Donna did more listening than talking as she hadn't made the trip up with them and didn't know most of the places they were talking about. All the same, they were including her, and she enjoyed it.

London's gaze shifted several times, taking in movement around them, then she sat up straight from where she'd been lounging in a folding chair.

"Something's going on." She nodded toward the road.

Donna turned to find several of the men, both from the ranch and the ones who'd come up from Arizona making their way out from the bunkhouse and barns, as if there had been some signal the women hadn't heard. They weren't in a hurry, no one was running or rushing but it was clear they were headed somewhere.

Several of the women turned their chairs so they could watch whatever was about to happen more comfortably. Donna frowned as she watched, wondering what could be going on and should they do something?

By the time they finished gathering there were roughly ten or so men, she didn't count so she couldn't be sure, and they formed a line between the little courtyard that had been set up and the road. Several stood with their arms crossed over their chests, some stood with their hands on their hips and a couple clasped one hand with the

other behind their backs.

“Can anyone tell what’s up?” she asked, her voice low as she leaned closer to Beth.

“Someone’s coming in,” Kerry pointed one finger down the road at the plume of dust being kicked up by a vehicle headed up the ranch road. From the size of the plume, Donna guessed it wasn’t a motorcycle.

“No one went into town?” She scanned the line of men, there weren’t enough there to be everyone, but with their backs to the women, she couldn’t identify everyone and couldn’t tell who was missing.

“They wouldn’t be here if they were expecting anyone.” London stood, she pulled her phone from her pocket as she went to the bunkhouse and stepped inside. She was gone for less than a minute before she appeared again and came back their way. “Sadist says it’s an unfamiliar SUV. And he and Malice will be out in just a moment.” London made her way back to the group but didn’t sit. Instead, she moved to stand behind the chair she’d been sitting in before, put her hands on the back, and waited.

Donna wondered what was going on. She looked at the other women, and the only one who seemed to know, or be concerned was London, but then this was her place. If there were trouble, it was less likely to have anything to do with the rest of them. Still, she didn’t think these were the kind of people to sit back and watch something happen to their friends.

Which was likely why the guys had lined up, side by side between the clearing and the road. She didn’t know if the purpose was to present a united front or to put up a barrier between whoever was coming in and the women. She did notice that none of the women approached the line, whether to join them or ask what was going on. Even when London had wanted to know, she’d gone into the bunkhouse, not to the line.

But then, that could simply be because the bunkhouse was closer, and Donna was reading too much into it. Things that weren't there.

The minutes seemed to stretch into hours. She knew the drive didn't take that long, and from the plume of dust, they had to be moving at a good speed, but there was no car appearing.

Just when she'd decided that whoever it was had second thoughts, they must have given up and turned around, a large SUV pulled into the drive. Donna only caught a couple of glimpses of it between the bodies of the men still lined up, unmoving between where she sat and the driveway.

Her heart seemed to stutter for a moment before kicking into high gear. That was one of the vehicles that belonged to the commune. They'd found her. And not just in the restaurant. How had Jacob found her here after seeing her in town? The vehicle pulled in the driveway and came to a stop aimed right at her.

"Take a deep breath, they've got this." Beth's voice beside her made Donna realize she'd been breathing way too fast. She was hyperventilating and she hadn't even known it.

The world spun, then seemed to stop with a click as she watched between the bodies of Savage and his brothers. The front doors on the SUV opened and someone got out on each side. She couldn't see who it was, not between the men and the doors of the truck, but when one of them spoke, she didn't need to see to know who it was.

Noah. He'd found her and now he was here. To make her go back. she couldn't do it. She couldn't go back with him. Not just because of herself, but she couldn't let her baby be raised like that. She wouldn't let her baby be brainwashed into believing that the things that went on there were normal, or acceptable.

No. She'd never got back with him. Even if it meant never going anywhere again.

With that determination made, something in Donna calmed. Her heart settled into a more normal rhythm and the world stopped spinning. Things came into focus like they hadn't been before she realized who was in the SUV.

"There's no one here that belongs to you," Savage's voice, and the certainty in it drew her attention. She considered letting him handle it but couldn't. That would be cowardice.

Almost on auto pilot, she stood and walked up behind the line of men, none of whom seemed to notice she was coming, except Savage. She saw his shoulders tense and the hand behind his back, the one that wasn't holding on to the wrist of his other hand, spread out flat, as if telling her to stop. She probably should do as he indicated but didn't.

Instead, she continued. Until she stood just behind Savage, so she was visible in the gap between him and Ghost. The gap was just wide enough she could get through it without touching either man, if she turned sideways. If Noah tried to grab her and drag her from behind them, both men would have time, and she had no doubt, the ability to stop him.

She stayed behind them, giving herself that barrier of safety as she confronted the man who had terrified her and made her life a living hell for more of the last year than he hadn't.

"Why are you here, Noah?" she asked, surprised at how strong her voice was, how it didn't shake.

"I'm here to get you."

“How did you even find me?” she asked.

“You almost got away,” Jacob said with a laugh, “but you couldn’t keep from going out. I had about given up, was going to go back to the compound and be done with you. But then I spotted the two of you. After that, it was just a matter of asking around about bikers. Now get in the car and we’ll go home.”

“She’s not going anywhere,” Savage snarled.

Donna didn’t speak to him, just laid one hand on his arm where it lay draped along his back. She wondered if he’d chosen to stand this way because it would be easier to draw the pistol he kept in the small of his back.

“She’s mine and I’ve come to get her,” Noah addressed Savage, but held a hand toward Donna. “Come home to me, Donna.”

“I’ll never go with you again, Noah. I left because I wanted to. I’ve been trying to get away from you for some time. I don’t belong to you. I don’t belong to anyone but myself.”

His semi-pleasant smile turned almost feral as he turned to look at her. “That’s not what the state says. The state says you’re my wife. You will come home with me and be a proper wife.”

“The state is wrong, but that can be fixed. I’ve already started on the paperwork to rectify that error. But as for coming with you, not to mention your fucked up idea of being a proper wife, let me say this loud and clear so there is no mistaking how I feel. I’d rather die. And please don’t think that’s hyperbole, or that I’m being dramatic. I will never ever go with you or be a part of your life. If I’m forced to, I will make it my life’s mission to end my life and take as many of you ass backward, misogynistic, abusive fuckers with me as I can.”

When she'd finished her tirade, she realized that she'd stepped forward until her shoulders pressed against both Savage and Ghost's arms, as if their refusal to move was holding her back. Noah had taken a step backward, she didn't know if it was her words or her vehemence that had driven him back, but he had retreated, not her. That was huge and sent a small wave of triumph through her.

"You heard the woman," Tuck stepped out of line, taking a single step toward the two intruders. "I suggest you get back in your truck and leave, then forget where you found her, but not what has been said here. If I, or any of these men see you here again, your troubles won't have to worry about her divorcing your worthless ass. She'll be a widow."

"Who are you?" Noah looked Tuck up and down, and from the look on his face, obviously found him lacking.

"The owner here, and the man who has decided you're trespassing. Leave or the police will be involved."

Noah's eyes narrowed and he stared back at the other man before he turned and looked at Jacob. He gave the man who'd been driving the SUV a nod, they both got back in and left.

No one moved until they were gone. Once their taillights disappeared down the road, Savage spun to glare at her, his jaw clenched and his eyes blazing with barely contained rage. Terror flashed through her but disappeared just as quickly. He wasn't Noah. He promised he would never hurt her. Better to know for sure now than trust him and find out later, when she was trapped. He didn't say a word, but bent, wrapped an arm around the backs of her thighs and lifted.

Taken by surprise she found herself bent in half, staring at his butt. It was a nice butt.

She fought the urge to laugh at the thought, knowing it was ridiculous given the circumstances. Then wondered at her own sanity. How had she gone from terrified of one man to wanting to laugh when another man-handled her like this?

Savage couldn't believe her. He'd been there, trying to keep her safe. To keep that fuckwad away from her and she'd stepped up and faced him.

Damn, he was proud of how she'd faced him, but still. Part of him couldn't help but want to scream, to rage at her because how could he keep her safe if she wouldn't stay put?

He needed to talk some sense into her, to make her see reason, but not here, not in front of everyone. Because if he had to, he'd give the baby as a reason that she couldn't do what she'd threatened. How could she swear to end her own life? How could he live without her?

At the same time, Savage couldn't help but be proud of her. She'd stood up to her abuser. She'd told him in no uncertain terms what she would do and that she would kill as many of them as she could if they forced her back to the hell she'd escaped. What man wouldn't be proud that their woman had that much backbone? That much confidence in what she could do?

Once he'd picked her up, Savage debated where to take her. He wanted walls, real ones, not just the tent where anyone could hear what they were saying. He wanted somewhere they wouldn't be overheard, and where she would feel comfortable talking back and telling him how she felt and in the middle of this group wasn't it, he knew.

"Use my place," Malice said from where he stood next to Sadist at the end of the line

of Savage's brothers. He hadn't bothered to put on a shirt, but had come out in just his jeans to support the rest of the club while they'd confronted an unknown. He lifted one hand and pointed toward a path that led out of sight. "The front door is open."

Savage nodded and headed in that direction, half surprised that Donna wasn't making noise or fighting him. He turned and followed the road, after a couple of minutes, before they'd left the group behind, she spoke.

"I'm not going to run away. Can I walk wherever we're going?"

Savage didn't respond, just grunted. He was not in the mood to put her down. With what she'd said to that fuckwit, she was lucky she wasn't bound as well as over his shoulder. He was also considering a gag, not because he wanted to silence her but because her words had hurt. Hurt more than he wanted to admit, even to himself.

Right now, the comforting weight of her in his arms and draped over his shoulder was all that was keeping him from losing his shit. Hopefully, by the time they reached the house, he would regain his control, if not all of his composure.

He didn't know exactly how far the walk was to the place Malice shared with Bonnie was but when he reached the porch, he was ready to let Donna stand on her own.

"You all right?" he asked when she rubbed her belly. He hadn't thought about that. "I didn't hurt you or the little one, did I?"

"I'm sure you didn't. I'm fine. Just not used to being carried like that." She rubbed again, and he noticed she wasn't rubbing low on her belly where the baby rested, hopefully safe. Instead, she was rubbing higher just below her ribs. And as he thought about it, yes that was where his shoulder would have hit her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I would never do that on purpose.” He wanted to say more but didn’t want to sound like he was making excuses. There was no excuse he could make if he’d hurt her, even inadvertently. He stepped up on the porch beside her then passed her to the door, which he opened. He motioned for her to precede him through the door. He then waited until she’d gone inside to follow her in and close the door behind them.

“I’m not hurt. You don’t need to be sorry.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “But what’s with the caveman act?”

“Have a seat, we need to talk.” He moved past her and sat on one end of the couch, then looked up at her, expectantly. He wasn’t going to have this conversation until she sat. She didn’t have to sit next to him, only sit down and talk to him.

Hell, he admitted to himself, he couldn’t even force her to do that. If she refused, there was nothing he could do, well that he would.

“Please, have a seat.” He waved one hand around the room, indicating all of the several places she could sit with a single motion.

Donna glared at him, took a deep breath, and let it out with a huff, then folded her arms across her chest and sat on the couch. Not beside him but not at the far end either. That gave him a bit of hope. She wasn’t trying to get as far away from him as she could. It was a good sign. Maybe he hadn’t pissed her off too badly.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper.” Savage fought to keep his voice calm and even. “I shouldn’t have picked you up and carried you off like that. I have no defense; all I can do is say I’m sorry and I’ll do my best not to let it happen again.”

She shot him a glare, but her arms didn’t move. “It’s not the being picked up and carried off I mind. It’s the not talking to me. Not responding when I talk to you.”

“I didn’t think about that. I was so upset, so angry I didn’t want to say anything until I’d calmed down some. I didn’t want to say something that would make things worse.”

“Then tell me that. Tell me you need a few minutes. I can accept that. I can’t accept silence.” She turned and looked out the window. “Hauling me off like a caveman, while refusing to talk to me sends my mind into overtime. It throws everything that Noah ever did in front of my eyes, and tells me that’s what’s waiting for me. That’s why you won’t talk to me.” She took another deep breath and let it out. Savage noticed how it shook. She was barely holding it together.

He reached out and laid a hand on her arm, but he didn’t want her to feel like he was trying to control her or act like a caveman, as she’d called him.

“I’m sorry. It never occurred to me that would happen. I just needed to get you out of there.” He slid forward and rested his elbows on his knees and stared down at the floor. “I knew if I didn’t do something to get us out of there, to get you away, I was going to start screaming at you in front of everyone. I didn’t want to do that to you.” He forced himself to swallow, despite the lump forming in his throat. “But I couldn’t stand there and not let you know how your words affected me.”

“What do you mean?” She sounded confused.

He was still bent over his lap when he turned his head to look at her. Was it possible she had no idea the effect her words had on him? That she didn’t know that her threat to that cocksucker had knocked the breath out of him? That it had taken everything in him to keep from holding her back and screaming no as she confronted him?

“Babe. When you came up behind us to confront him, I was a little irritated. We were lined up to keep them from getting to you women. We were protecting you. And you confronted him anyway.”

“But I was careful about it. I stayed behind you, and that wasn’t an accident. I was letting you stay between me and him so that if he tried something, you were between us to keep it from happening.” She leaned close, putting one hand on his back.

Knowing that she hadn’t been careless in her determination to confront that duckfucker mollified his screaming emotions, a little. He still wanted to hold on to her, to tell her she was never allowed to do what she’d threatened, that he needed her too badly and should that piece of shit manage to kidnap her, because it would have to be kidnapping, then she needed to hold on until he found her because he would be coming. But could he tell her that? Could he ask her to make that kind of sacrifice?

“When you told him that you’d rather die than go back to him I was so proud that you were telling him how you felt and that you wanted nothing to do with him.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue, despite how hard it was to force the words out. “But when you told him that you’d kill yourself and take as many of them with you as you could, I almost had a heart attack on the spot.” He glanced down at his hands where he pressed his fingertips together, then back to her. “I can’t tell you not to. I can’t tell you it will never come to that.” He closed his eyes a moment, then turned back to stare down at his hands, without seeing them. “I can tell you that should he get his hands on you, to please hold on. Please don’t give up. Because I’ll be out there looking. And I will never give up. Not until I have you back.” He inhaled a ragged breath then let his head drop until his chin pressed into his chest as he tried to regain his composure enough to keep talking. “I’ll leave it up to you to make any final decision, because if you’re at his mercy, then obviously I’m not there to stop him.” Savage turned and looked at her again, making sure she met his gaze. “But I want you to be dead certain that as long as I’m breathing, I will be looking for you. One way or another, I will get you back.”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out as he lifted one hand to let her know he wasn’t done. Not quite.

“There are only a few things in this life I can guarantee you. But one thing I can tell you without a doubt is that if something happens, something like that useless piece of shit trying to take you away from me, I will never give up. I will search for you until I find you. I will burn down the world to get you back by my side. And I won’t stop until I have you back. Even if that means all I have is your body.” His voice had gone rough, but he didn’t care. He had to get the words out. She had to know. Because she had to know what would happen to him, to the world, if that twat waffle, or any of his crew took her from him.

By now, tears streamed down his face, but he ignored them. She needed to see he meant this. She needed to know how important she was to him.

“And just so you know,” he continued after a moment, “I won’t be the only one. I won’t even have to ask. My brothers will have my back, and should it come to that, that commune will no longer be an issue. There will be nothing left of them but scorched earth.” He let his gaze drop to her lap, where her fingers sat knotted together as if she was trying to keep them still while he spoke. “Honestly, if you were taken from me, and all I was able to get back was your body, I can’t guarantee the whole world won’t go scorched earth, at least as far as I’m concerned.”

He took another breath and wondered where all that had come from. He hadn’t planned on saying so much. He hadn’t planned on laying out everything he’d been thinking for the last few minutes but once he’d gotten started, he hadn’t been able to stop. Now, he just hoped he hadn’t scared her off, because as hard as he would fight to keep her with him and safe, if she wanted to go, and he was sure that was what she wanted, he would let her go. It might break his heart, but he wouldn’t hold her against her will.

D onna stared at Savage, stunned by what he'd said. When she'd been talking to Noah, she hadn't thought about how Savage might feel or what he might think about what she was saying. She'd been trying to make a point. Not that she hadn't been honest. She would rather die than be trapped at Noah's mercy again. Not that he had any. She'd learned that months ago. Now, she felt like falling for his act of being sweet and loving was one of the more naive mistakes she'd made.

She stared at Savage, not sure whether she was more surprised by how much he obviously cared about her or about how far he was willing to go to make her safe, and make sure she knew it.

All of the anger that had built up in her as he'd carried her off away from the others evaporated. Her chest ached. She scooted closer to him on the couch so she could lay her hand on his back instead of just on his arm and took a deep breath. She had to say something, but she didn't know what.

"It wouldn't be my first move," she managed to say, her voice softer than she liked, but since she hadn't planned on this conversation, she went with it. "If it came down to it, I would wait as long as I could before I resorted to something so drastic. But I don't know if I could live through that again. Surviving it once changed me and while I know I can move on, I can have a life now that I'm out, if I had to go back, especially if I had no hope of getting out again or if I was forced to face the prospect of raising my child like that, I can't say where exactly I would draw the line. I do know I'd rather die than bring a child into that. I will not raise a baby to think that is normal or to perpetuate that cycle." She watched him, waiting for some kind of

reaction and enjoying the warm, solid feel of his back beneath her hand.

He dropped his face into his hands, kept it there for a couple of moments and she wondered what he was thinking. After a moment he let out a low growl and scrubbed his hands over his face before sitting up and turning to look at her. Her hand slid off his back as he moved. Not knowing what else to do with it, she brought it back and let both hands rest in her lap.

“I’m not entirely sure how we got here, babe. I picked up a girl who needed some help. I never thought I’d end up catching feelings, much less falling this quick or this hard.” He reached out and picked up her hand, enveloping it in both of his. “I never thought I’d have anyone but my brothers. I didn’t think it was possible for someone to work their way, not just into my heart but into my soul, especially to get so deep in so little time. But you’ve done it. I don’t know what I’d do without you. I don’t know that I want to find out.” He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush, as if he was cleansing himself of something, but she couldn’t tell what. “Before I met you, I didn’t have a plan. I floated from day to day, working and helping my club. I lived to have fun, drink a little, fight a little and ride a lot. But then I was out for a run one day and met this little bit of a spitfire. And without knowing it, my world changed.” He shook his head.

Donna didn’t know what to say. Somehow, in a very brief time, she’d come to not just rely on Savage but to trust him too. She curled her fingers into his until they wove their fingers together.

“When I left Noah, I had no idea what I was going to do. I had no idea how I would live, much less take care of a baby. I thought I might have to either give up the baby or terminate, not that I want to do that, but I thought it might be my only option. I believed then, and I believe now, that even that was a better option than raising a child to think that kind of life, that living with the kind of abuse I was dealing with, was normal. I’m glad I don’t have to make that choice.” She used her free hand to

scrub across her eyes, then pinch the bridge of her nose as she tried to find the words to tell him the rest of her thoughts.

“Oh, God, babe. I’m glad you don’t either.” He pulled her into his arms, settling her on his lap.

He held her with strong but gentle arms. One hand wrapped around her, so she felt like no matter what came, what trials they faced, she was safe. He’d make sure she stayed that way, the other resting low on her belly.

“If you decide you can’t do it. That you just can’t live with having this baby, I’ll support you. I’ll do whatever you need to get you through it. You want to keep on the way you’re going, you want to keep and raise this baby and I’ll back that. I’ll raise it the same as if it had my DNA. Just say the word, babe, and I’ll make you both mine. We need to check and see if you actually are married according to the state, and if the state says yes, get that terminated as quickly as possible.”

“Why?” she asked with a frown. She wasn’t going to argue. She didn’t want to be tied to Noah any more than it seemed Savage wanted it, but she didn’t know why, and she needed to know.

Savage's chest ached and his stomach churned. He'd already said way more than he'd planned to, and now she wanted more. Not that he could blame her. She had a lot going on and more in sight down the road.

"I want to make sure you're free to do whatever you want. I have a couple ideas of what I'd like you to do, but I've already told you I won't force you," he said, enjoying the reassuring weight of her in his arms and on his lap.

"What is it you'd like me to do?" Her voice had gone husky, making parts of his body pay attention.

Down boy he told his dick as he reminded himself she just got out of a bad situation. She wouldn't want to jump into the kind of commitment he wanted. He could take it slow. But his head had a deadline, and maybe it would be better to start getting her used to the idea.

"I'm not sure I should say." He paused, watching her face. "I don't want to scare you and I'm afraid what I want will do just that."

"I'm not as easily frightened as the last few days make me look. Tell me what you're thinking," she met his gaze, "please."

How could he deny her when she looked at him all wide eyed and innocent. She wasn't innocent. She'd been through too much for that but that look made his protective instincts come to the surface, and they weren't very far away to begin with.

“I want us to get married.” He continued before she had a chance to say anything or even think up an argument. “I’m not saying now but I want it soon. I want you carrying my name before this one is born.” He pressed gently against her belly. “I want neither of you to have any doubt how I feel about you. I don’t want either of you to doubt I’ll always take care of you both.”

She stared at him for several seconds. He waited for her to say something, anything, then he noticed tears pooling in her eyes. When one spilled over and trailed down her cheek, he wiped it away with his thumb.

“Babe, please don’t cry. I didn’t say it to make you cry. I know you’re not ready for something like that, not yet. But I had to say it. I had to let you start getting used to the idea. Because if I get my way, that’s what’s going to happen, and I’m going to do everything I can to make sure it does. Well, everything that you’ll let me.”

“I want to believe. I want to say yes and just be happy, but I can’t.” Her hand came up to cover his where he cupped her belly. “It’s too much, too soon. I can’t trust it. Can you give me time? Time to heal and learn to trust myself again?”

“Babe,” he ran the back of one finger along her jaw, “I’d wait a lifetime if you’d just say yes. I don’t want to rush you into anything you’re not ready for. I want you to be as sure as I am. I didn’t lie when I said I want you both to have my name but if you’re not ready by then, it’s not a deal breaker.”

“Thank you.” She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. “I feel like all I say to you is thank you and that you’ll get tired of hearing it, but I just can’t say enough how much I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.” She released his neck and leaned back to once more cover his hand where it still sat on her tummy. “For both of us. Are you sure you want to take on a baby that’s not yours?” Her voice trembled on that last, and it only made Savage more certain.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been more certain of anything in my life. And along that line, we’ve got a guy back in Tucson who can do a little research and find out if you’re going to have to file for divorce. Let me message him and get him started on that. That way, we’ll know for sure either way by the time we get there. If it turns out you do, then I have no doubts one of the brothers will know of an attorney we can contact to get that done.” He kept one arm around her as he used his other hand to dig his phone out of his pocket.

With Donna still in his lap, he typed out a message to Gizmo, outlining what they needed, and giving him all the pertinent information, like full names and dates of birth for both Donna and the waste of skin that was her ex, as well as Donna’s social security information. He would have included the duck fucker’s, but she didn’t know it.

He’d sent the message and was sitting with Donna in his lap, his forehead pressed to hers, where they’d been for several minutes when she spoke up.

“Are we good?” she asked. “Or are you still mad at me?”

“We’re good, babe, and I wasn’t mad, at least not at you. I was gutted by what you said, and furious at him that he’d made you that desperate to get away. But I wasn’t mad at you.” He said all this without moving, his head still pressed against hers, as if he needed the contact to remind himself she was safe and not going anywhere.

“Good. I kind of hate to spoil the mood, but I need to find a bathroom. I’ve got to go. And I’m getting hungry again.”

“All right, we’ve got goals then.” He helped her to her feet and with only a little investigation, they found the bathroom. While she was inside, his phone vibrated, and thinking Gizmo had worked his magic fast, Savage pulled it out to check what he’d found.

The message wasn't from Gizmo.

Lurch: Not an emergency, everything is handled, and no one is hurt. But when you can, we need you both back here. We have a situation.

Savage tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. It seemed like if it wasn't one thing it was something else. After a moment he typed out his reply and sent it back.

Savage: We were just getting ready to head back. We'll be there soon.

He pocketed his phone and glanced toward the bathroom door, hoping she was all right and wondering what was going on that they wanted them back at the clearing. It couldn't be too bad, he told himself, or Lurch would have given him a heads up before just calling them back.

When she was finished and stepped out, he waited while she stepped close, then he pulled her into his arms, enjoying the moment as she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest.

"Are we okay, babe?" He bent and dropped a gentle kiss on top of her head. "You still mad about the way I hauled you out of there?"

"We're good," she said, her face still buried against his chest.

"Good. We need to head back. I don't know what's up, but Lurch messaged me. He says we're needed up at the clearing."

"Is everything all right?" She looked up at him, a frown on her face.

"I don't know. Let's go find out." He looked around and made sure they hadn't left a

mess, then stepped outside, making sure to latch the door before taking Donna's hand and walking back to the clearing.

Lurch sat next to Kerry as they approached the clearing but seeing them approach, he said something to her and stood, meeting them before they made it to the rest of the group.

"I need to talk to Savage for a moment, Donna, if you don't mind. I'm sure it won't take long. Why don't you go join the women?" Lurch said as he approached them.

"Go ahead," Savage kissed the top of her head again. "I'm sure this won't take long then we can get something to eat." He glanced at Lurch. "Dinner will be before too long, right?"

"It will. I've got men working on it now." He tilted the top of his head toward the outdoor kitchen where meals had been served since their arrival. There were a couple of men there working.

"All right." She looked back and forth between him and Lurch for a moment before going to where the women sat and taking a seat.

They were too far away to hear what was being said but he could tell the women were asking about his hauling her off the way he had.

"You said you needed us both, what's up?" Savage didn't turn to look at Lurch as he asked.

"Let's go into the horse barn for a minute." Lurch turned, but waited until Savage turned and joined him before walking away.

"I thought you wanted us both?" Savage asked.

“I did, and I do, but I decided to run this by you first. Let you make a decision, and depending on which way it goes, we’ll decide how much to tell her.”

Savage scowled. What the hell was going on? He didn’t have long to wait. As they reached the barn Lurch spoke again.

“You know we’ve got the prospects keeping an eye on the road into the ranch, right?”

“Yeah,” savage said. He knew it wasn’t just the local prospects too. Boomer and Demon, who had come up from Tucson with them, were taking shifts out there too. When those assignments had been made, Savage had been glad not to be a prospect anymore, but if they’d asked him to, he would have done it.

“Well, after that SUV showed and left, and after you hauled your girl off, we reached out to Boomer, who’s the one watching the road, to make sure they were leaving. He reported the SUV leaving, but only one person in it.” They walked down the wide aisle between stalls.

Savage’s body flashed hot, then cold. “That fucker is out there waiting to get his hands on her.”

“Not anymore.” Lurch came to a stop, turned to look at Savage. “It didn’t take us long to follow the road out and find where they’d stopped, and he got out. The idiot is so stupid even I could track him and I’m just a dumb redneck from Louisiana.” Lurch pushed open the stall and swept one hand inside, as if showing off some prize. Savage wasn’t sure what he meant until he looked in the stall. There, lying bound and gagged in the hay was the fucker who’d abused Donna. It took everything in him not stomp in his head then and there.

“So, we have some options. We can get the police involved, Tuck’s more than willing to press charges for trespassing.”

Savage turned and looked at Lurch as he continued to tell him what was going on. Focusing on the local president, helped Savage keep from kicking the little fucker in the ribs over and over.

“He’d already been told to leave, that he didn’t is more than enough grounds to press charges. But I also know that your girl’s had a bit of trouble with him. It might be better off, and easier for her if he just disappears. We can handle that, if you think that will work better. I’m going to let you decide. Whatever you think will be better, for the club, for your girl, that’s what we’ll do.”

Savage stared at the man lying in the straw, hands and feet bound, and fought the urge to kick the shit out of him. Instinct told him that if they killed the useless fucker then he couldn’t cause any more trouble.

But what if he and Donna were actually married? If he were missing, it would be harder for her to divorce him. If he were missing, his friend knew he’d last been here. If he went missing, as far as Savage knew, all avenues of search would lead investigators to the ranch and the Souls.

Besides if Donna found out they’d killed him without giving him a chance to do the right thing, he didn’t know how she would react. She believed he was a good guy. He wasn’t ready to disabuse her of that notion, at least not yet.

He took a deep breath and turned back to Lurch. “Call the cops. Let’s give him one last chance.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll sit down and give you my reasoning in a bit, but can I get five minutes alone with him before the cops show up?”

Lurch stared at him a moment, as if trying to read his mind and figure out what he was planning. “If we’re calling the cops, he’s got to be breathing when they get here.”

“I won’t kill him. I’m just going to make him hurt a bit. Hopefully enough he forgets about Donna, the ranch and all of us. But I’m not going to do anything permanent.” Savage glanced down at the man still lying on the straw, fully aware the worthless goatfucker could hear every word they were saying. “Hopefully.” He shot Lurch a grin that he hoped the asshole couldn’t see, and hopefully letting Lurch know he was kidding, mostly.

Lurch stared at him again. Savage couldn’t tell what he was thinking and didn’t want to try and figure it out.

“You get your five minutes,” Lurch said after a moment. “I’m going to go call the sheriff’s department. We’ve got a decent relationship with them after the incident with Bonnie, but I’m leaving Jake here with you to make sure there’s enough of that piece of shit left for them to come pick up.” Without waiting for a response, Lurch turned and walked away. He nodded at Jake on his way out but didn’t say anything more.

Savage turned his attention to the man on the floor, wondering where to start.

“You want to help me?” He glanced up at Jake.

“Not sure why I should.” The man who was supposed to make sure Savage didn’t hurt the waste of skin too badly leaned against the wall a few feet away.

“Well, aside from the fact that he was trespassing on the club, he’s a threat to one of our women.”

“She’s yours then?” Jake lifted one brow as he watched Savage.

“She’s mine. I’ll get her free of this fucker,” Savage toed the man in the ribs, none too gently, “Then I’m going to try and convince her to marry me. I want her wearing my name.”

Jake shook his head slowly but didn’t move away from the wall. Savage couldn’t tell what he was shaking his head about and didn’t have time to try and figure it out. He bent and grabbed the rope wrapped around the fucker’s wrists and hauled him to his feet.

It took him a couple tries to get his feet under him, and even then, he wasn’t too steady, making Savage wonder if he’d been hit in the head when they’d found him and brought him. Not that Savage cared, other than it might make him less likely to remember what Savage was about to tell him.

Looking around, he found a hook where the feed bucket usually hung. He shuffled the fucker in that direction and hooked the rope on his hands over the hook, keeping him from sitting or falling over. Savage didn’t care how comfortable it might or might not be, in fact he preferred it if the fuckwad hurt a bit. He hadn’t cared how Donna had felt when he’d raped her, so he didn’t get any consideration from Savage.

“Have you figured out who I am yet?” He didn’t bother removing the gag, the shithead could nod or not answer, not that Savage cared. He was going to do this either way.

The fucknut lifted his head and glared at Savage. Satisfaction filled Savage at what he was about to tell this excuse for a man.

“I’m the one she chose. I’m the one who will teach her how a woman’s supposed to be treated.” He stepped forward and drove his knee hard into the tied man’s balls, then stepped back as he folded over forward, a muffled scream of pain coming from behind the gag.

Savage watched him for a moment, enjoying the man's pained sounds. After a moment Savage grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up until he could meet the tied man's gaze. All anger and fight was gone from his eyes as a pain that all men dreaded filled them. Savage waited until the eyes focused on his face, then he spoke between clenched teeth.

"I'm the one who will kill you if you ever come near her again. Rest assured, this is no empty promise. You won't be my first kill and you likely won't be my last, but I'll rest a lot easier knowing you're dead and I'm betting Donna will to." Savage dropped the fuckweed's head and started to walk away but decided he didn't want the idiot to get off too easily. He wanted him hurting for a while to remember this lesson. Turning back to where the man still leaned forward, trying to protect his injured gonads, Savage spun and drove his elbow hard into the chicken fucker's ribs. He pulled back and hit him again, this time without the momentum of the spin and aiming for a different spot. He didn't think he'd broken any ribs, but he hoped he'd cracked at least one, maybe more. That would have him remember Savage and that he'd better stay away from him and Donna for a good long time.

"Cut him loose and hand him over to the police. I've got to go see my woman." He didn't tell Jake he had to warn her and let her know that she'd likely have to talk to the cops. Since they were coming, it would be a good chance to document some of what had been happening to her.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:04 am

Donna joined the women around the seating area, some gave her looks as if they knew what she and Savage had been doing and it wasn't talking, at least in their mind. Then again, they likely hadn't heard what she'd said to Noah. They would have no idea how upset Savage might have been.

She didn't know how long they'd been gone but yeah, they'd had time for that, if not the inclination. Well, not yet. If they hadn't been called back here, for some unknown reason, they might have gotten there.

She listened into the talk but didn't add to the conversation. Her mind was still on her talk with Savage. He wanted to marry her. He wanted her and this baby to have his name. She knew she should feel something about that, but right now, she couldn't. She was numb. She didn't know if it was because Noah had shown back up or that she'd had to lock most of her emotions down to confront him, or maybe she'd just dealt with more than she could handle today.

It was good that he wasn't looking for an answer now. Especially with Noah's threat that they were legally married. And that she might have to legally divorce him before she could do anything else. How would she be able to afford something like that?

"Babe?" Savage's voice pulled her out of her thoughts.

She blinked several times and dagged her mind to the present instead of inside her head. She found him sitting on his heels in front of her, his hands braced on the arm rests of her chair, as if he hadn't wanted to startle her by touching her when she hadn't been aware he was there.

“There you are.” He smiled gently. “Let’s go for a little walk. I need to talk to you a moment.” He tilted his head toward the main house as he watched her.

Her heart seemed to double its pace as he stood and held out a hand for her. She laid one hand in his and let him pull her to her feet. He kept her hand in his, weaving their fingers together as they turned toward the main house and started walking.

Savage was silent for a couple of minutes, until they were far enough that no one would overhear what they were saying.

“Your ex didn’t leave when the truck left. Somewhere between here and the road the guy driving stopped, and your ex got out.”

Donna’s entire body flashed hot, then cold and the world seemed to spin. Her chest tightened and she couldn’t breathe.

“Babe.” His voice centered her. “It’s okay. We realized it when the truck left the ranch, and they went out and found him. We have him. He’s not going to hurt you or try to take you back.”

The band around her chest seemed to loosen and she was able to draw a breath. “Tell me the rest. Is he dead?”

“Do you want him dead?”

There was no judgement in his voice, just the question. She stared at him for a moment as she thought about it, really considered did she want Noah dead?

She took a deep breath and tried to untangle her feelings. Did she want Savage to kill Noah? No. She didn’t want that, not for Noah’s sake or even her own, but for Savage’s. She didn’t want him to have that guilt. Did she wish Noah was dead? Not really but she did wish him somewhere he would never bother her again. Dead did

qualify for that.

“Not exactly. I just want him to leave me alone. Forever. Dead would accomplish that.”

“He’s not dead. And we aren’t going to make him that way, at least not this time.” He kept his eyes on her face as he spoke, keeping his voice soft, as if he was afraid of scaring her off. “I can’t guarantee that if he comes after you again.”

“Tell me.”

She did her best to keep breathing and stay calm as he explained what had happened, that he’d decided to call the police and why.

“You’ll need to talk to them. To tell them what’s been going on and what he’s done to you. We need to get it all documented, just in case.” He wrapped an arm around her and held her close, so she didn’t feel awkward, even once she realized they were standing in the middle of the path between the house and the clearing where everyone still gathered. “Once we get to Tucson and get you settled, we’ll be in touch with an attorney to take care of anything we need to in order to make sure he has no legal claim to you.”

“Or the baby.”

“Or the baby. That’s the one thing I want you to keep from the police. You and I are the only ones who know for sure. Kinard knew from the texted questions that someone he’d been around was or might be pregnant, but not who. I haven’t had Gizmo work up a negative test yet. We’ll get that done soon, too. Until then we need to keep it to ourselves. If no one knows he can’t use the baby as an excuse to try and stay in your life. If the baby is mine, and as far as I’m concerned, it is, then a whole world of options opens up to us. Understand?”

Donna nodded. She could do this. “Will you be there?”

“I’ll stay with you every step. The only way you could tear me away is if you tell me to go, even then I’d be hard pressed to leave you to go through something like this on your own.”

She stepped closer and dropped her forehead against his chest. “I don’t want to do it. I mean I know it has to be done but I don’t want to.” She took a deep breath and continued with what she knew needed to be said. “I can do it if you’re with me.”

“Then I’ll be there,” he said it as if it was that simple, and maybe to him it was.

“I don’t know if I could do this without you.”

“You could. I know you could. You’re strong and smart and you do what needs to be done, but I’m glad I can be there to make it easier for you.” He used one finger under her chin to gently lift her face until she looked up at him. “I’ll do everything I can to make it all easier for you. I’m not saying any of this will be easy. I’m sure it will be hard and times when we want to give up. But I won’t give up if you don’t.” Savage paused, his gaze searching her face. “I realize now that I’ve said I’ll be there for you, and I’ll help you but there’s something big that I’ve forgotten to tell you.”

She held her breath, wondering what bombshell he was about to drop on her. Was he married? Was he committed somewhere else? Somehow, she couldn’t believe that.

“Somewhere along the line, I fell in love with you. I didn’t plan to but between your strength and your heart, you found your way into mine.” He pressed his lips to her forehead and stayed there for a moment.

Emotion filled her chest, making it hard to breathe, but she managed. Liquid pooled in her eyes, but she didn’t want to ruin the moment, so she stayed where she was, her arms around his middle as they stood together. “You’re not the only one,” she

managed to whisper after what felt like several minutes. “I love you too. I didn’t think I could love again after what Noah did to me, but I was wrong. You amaze me.”

“Savage? Donna? The sheriff’s department is here. They’ll want to talk to you,” Ghost’s voice called out, drawing them both back to what was happening.

Savage took a deep breath, then lifted his head. “Come on. Let’s get this over with so we can move on with our lives.”

“We can do this. Just like we’ll do everything else.” She let him keep his hand in hers as they turned back to the clearing where everyone was gathered. “I think as long as we’re together we can face anything.”

He lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of hers, his gaze meeting hers as he spoke. “Together.”

Thank you for reading Savage, part of the Demented Souls series.

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