



You're My Person – For Always (Gem Haven MC #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Secrets run deep in Gem Haven.

As a Gem Haven Motorcycle Club member, Kingsley thought bringing Kenna home would finally calm the storm between them. Hes spent years chasing her, protecting her, loving her. All he wants to do is settle down with her and live a quiet life on the mountain.

But the mountain has secrets. The deeper he digs, the darker they become. Every new discovery threatens to drag them both under.

Kenna has always struggled to stay angry at Kingsley, the one constant in her traumatic life. Her heart is heavy as she wrestles with a burden she must carry. With her dads days on death row numbered, the pieces of her fractured past pull at her— a puzzle shes desperate to solve.

Together, Kingsley and Kenna must unravel a web of buried secrets. In Gem Haven, loyalty is tested, love is a battlefield, and some secrets refuse to stay buried.

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Kingsley

—Two Years Ago—

Kenna narrowed her eyes and shook her head, stubbornly refusing to listen. Kingsley stepped toward her, pinning her to the wall. She needed to learn a big lesson.

Don't ever fuck with a Stafford.

"You're playing a dangerous game, brat." He raised his arms and planted his hands on the wall behind her.

Kenna arched her back. The front of him warmed. He looked between them. His cock throbbed to attention. She'd pushed her full breasts against him.

"You kissed me back." She softened her voice. "Your hand was on my ass."

He growled. "I was trying to get you off me."

Her hand cupped his cock through his jeans. "Explain this."

Fire lit his veins. It was impossible not to see how Kenna had grown up through the years. He stayed away just long enough that she'd physically change each time he returned to check on her.

The young woman standing in front of him was not the young girl who was mad at the world. Kenna had bottled all the anger and hurt she'd experienced in her short life into an out-of-control passion.

A passion she directed toward him any chance she could get. Instead of embracing her friends, foster parents, and teachers, she'd given him every precious emotion she refused to give everyone else.

And he knew what a fucking gift that was, even if Kenna hadn't hit the point where she understood what she was doing or why she chose him.

She only wanted love.

Being loved is a basic need, and most people take it for granted because it comes easily and freely.

But Kenna had only experienced losing love, and the pain had scarred her.

At one time, Kenna had all the love a girl could want, and she lost it all, one by one when her mom died, her dad died, and the state of Idaho took her away from her younger sister when they split them apart within the foster care system.

She wanted that love back more than anything, and she turned to the one person she felt safe with to fill that deep-seated need—him.

She fucking had his balls in her hand and knew she could do whatever she wanted to him.

Kenna's head tilted more, and she stroked him, sure of every touch. His toes curled in his boots. She wasn't old enough to have the kind of confidence that came with the experience of women twice her age.

He grabbed her wrist, halting her. "You're playing with fire, Kenna."

Her eyes searched his. "I'm not afraid."

His grip tightened, but his resolve to stop touching her wavered. He could feel the heat from her body, smell the sweet scent of her arousal, and see the challenge in her gaze. He leaned in, their faces millimeters apart, and whispered, "You think you're ready for this?"

Her pulse beat at the base of her neck, and she licked her lips, daring him. "I've been ready for a lot longer than you think."

Kingsley's gaze dropped to her mouth, and he bargained with the devil for a split second. It was only the two of them. No one would know if he fucked her. She'd been asking for it for months. Hell, years. Since she was sixteen years old, Kenna had made it clear she was open to having sex with him.

He snapped his gaze back to her, angry for believing they were the only two that mattered. "You don't even know what's going on."

He was her protector. Her guardian until she was old enough to live independently.

He'd done a favor for his dad. When Ridge Stafford spoke, people listened—and that included his sons. He and Zane promised to look after Kenna and her younger sister, River.

Their dad, sitting in prison for assault with a deadly weapon, owed Tom Pruitt a favor. In return, he and Zane carried out their part.

Tom Pruitt wanted his daughters to believe he was dead. But the truth was, he was sitting on death row in the state prison, waiting for the day his life would end.

He held the truth from Kenna because the lie was painful enough. She'd never be able to go through losing her dad all over again if she found out his secret.

She yanked her wrist free from his clutch and stepped closer, her breasts pressing against his chest. His body hardened more.

"Please, King," she murmured, her voice thick with need. "Don't send me back, thinking no one will ever love me again. That today might be the last time I ever get to see you. That you're getting ripped away from me, just like my family."

The air charged between them. Tension rolled through his body. He fisted his hands, banging them on the wall, fighting the urge to give her everything she wanted.

Kenna rolled her hips against him, biting her bottom lip. She pushed his boundaries, testing him, and a part of him was one hundred percent in on the game she played.

He leaned down. His mouth hovered over hers. "Are you sure?" he whispered.

Kenna pulled his face down to hers without a second thought, her lips crushing against his in a heated kiss that sent shockwaves through him. He tugged her closer, taking control of the kiss with years of pent-up lust pouring out.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, tugging him closer, dancing her tongue in and out of his mouth.

Her breath mingled with his. A rush of desire hit him low.

He gripped her ass, lifting her slightly so she could feel him fully against her. Kenna moaned into his mouth, attempting to climb him and failing.

He picked her up. She'd won. The game she played was far more complex and

dangerous than she understood. But he couldn't fight her.

The world outside their embrace faded away. Only their pounding hearts filled the silence. Kingsley slid his hands underneath her shirt and spread his palms on her bare back.

She gasped into his mouth. He groaned, his grip tightening as he explored the curve of her waist and the softness of her hips.

He needed to touch every inch of her.

Setting her on her feet, his hands went to the front of her body, molding over her ribs, her breasts. She arched into his touch, her nipples pebbling against his palm. Kingsley's thumb circled the tightness, teasing until she writhed in his arms.

He broke the kiss, panting as he stared down at her. "You're going to get more than you begged for."

Kenna's eyes sparked with determination. "Show me," she challenged.

With a low growl, Kingsley claimed her mouth again, his other hand reaching between her legs to cup her sex. She was wet, soaking through her panties. He slid his fingers under the fabric, finding her clit and stroking with a firm pressure that had her hips jerking in response.

Her nails dug into the leather of his vest, holding on as he brought her closer and closer to the edge as she whimpered.

He needed her wet, plump, and ready.

Her knees buckled. He caught her, walking her backward to the hotel bed until she

tottered and lost her balance, sitting on the bed with a plop. He went down with her, spreading her legs.

He slipped the tip of his pinky in her pussy, stroking in and out with slow deliberation. Kenna held on, not moving. That told him everything he needed to know.

She hadn't been with anyone else.

He moved his mouth to her neck, licking, sucking, nibbling his way to her ear. "I can stop," he whispered.

He needed to give her an out. She postured, coming across as unbreakable. But this was no longer a game she played. It was her virginity.

And he knew her better than she knew herself.

She wasn't as tough as she wanted him to believe. There was a sensitivity about her that allowed all the things in her short life to scar her.

He wanted inside her. To get deeper, beyond the scars, and heal the hurt.

"I'll hate you forever if you stop," she whispered.

Her hips rocked against his hand, her breath coming in gasps as she chased the orgasm that was out of reach. He found her clit again, circling it with the perfect amount of pressure as he quickened his pattern.

Her body moved under no direction from Kenna. He nibbled her ear. "That's it. Take it."

With a cry, she came, convulsing in his arms. He held her through it, slowly drawing out her pleasure until she went limp and trembled.

He put his lips on her ear. "We can stop now—"

"No." She inhaled a shaky breath. "I want you ."

With a growl, he yanked her shirt over her head, pulling her bra over her breasts. He leaned down and captured a nipple in his mouth, biting and suckling until she moaned. His hand left her pussy, struggling with his belt.

Kenna pushed his hand away and undid his buckle, and managed to get his jeans open, springing his cock free. A surge of arousal pulsed through him, making him bigger. Harder. Longer.

He would fill and stretch her in ways she had never imagined.

Her eyes widened, a mix of fear and excitement in her gaze. He held still, slowing.

"It'll be uncomfortable when I push inside you," he whispered.

She nodded, trusting him.

"Slip your panties off." He pushed himself to his knees and dove his hand into his back pocket for his wallet, where he had a condom.

Kenna raised her hips and worked the tiny strap of cloth off her legs, dropping her panties on the floor. He rolled on the condom, noting she couldn't take her eyes off his cock. She hid her true feelings. He wasn't sure if his size struck fear in her or fascinated her.

He positioned himself between her legs. Not taking the chance to change his mind or ask her again if she was sure she wanted to have sex, Kenna wrapped her legs around the back of his thighs, hitting that sweet response, and his pelvis bucked forward.

He positioned himself at her entrance. The tip of his cock nudged her opening. Looking at her until she locked eyes on him, he paused.

"You're mine now," he whispered, and then pushed inside.

Kenna's eyes rolled back in her head. An uncomfortable groan escaped her lips. He held still for a moment, giving her time to adjust, and then he moved.

Slow. Steady. Deep.

Kenna inhaled swiftly, scraping her nails on his biceps. "King."

It wasn't a protest. It wasn't fear. It was surprise. It was pleasure.

He moved his body faster. Determined to show her what sex was all about, he found his arms shaking as he held himself above her and his pace grew erratic. He breathed heavily as he approached his own climax.

"King." Kenna slapped his shoulders. "Yes."

Her body spasmed around him in pleasure. He groaned, no longer able to hold himself back. His hips stuttered before he shot his load.

He hung his head, trying to gain his second wind. He'd crossed a line he never thought he would. But the taste of her was addictive. He'd wondered what it would be like to have her sweet body wrapped around him and his dick buried deep inside of her.

"You're mine." His voice thickened. "Mine."

Her eyes searched his, looking for reassurance. Kingsley knew she was scared, but he also knew that she craved intimacy—craved him. He had seen the way she looked at him, the way she watched him. Tension between them had grown over the years, and now it exploded into something raw and untamed.

He kissed her gently. She melted into him. He could feel her trust. Her surrender. His chest tightened, taking on more responsibility.

He'd fucked her.

Guilt filled his gut. He pulled out of her, taking that time to pull off the condom and drop it in the trash can beside the bed.

Kenna sat up, wincing. He gritted his teeth, knowing he'd done that to her. In the matter of minutes, he'd taken her virginity.

She inched her way to the side of the bed and sat beside him. Her gaze searched his, a flicker of something new in their depths. "You'll help me find him, right?" she whispered, the words barely audible.

His chest tightened. He stood from the bed, tucking his spent cock back into his jeans and fastening his belt. From the moment he found her and initiated himself into her life, she'd always had the same request.

And every time he answered her, she'd leave, not liking what he said.

"Kenna, your dad is dead." He tucked his pistol back underneath his belt.

Her eyes flashed with anger, lighting her features. "You're lying. He's out there. I just

need to find him."

He sat on the bed with her and ran his hands through his hair. "He's been dead for years."

Her face crumpled, and she scrambled off the bed, grabbing her shirt and pulling it back on. "Fuck you." Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I hate you."

Before he could calm her, she was gone. The door slammed behind her. He sighed, staring at the orange shag rug beneath his boots. He'd promised to protect her, to be there for her, and now he'd destroyed her.

He and his brother had watched over River and Kenna for the last six years as a favor to their dad, who owed Tom Pruitt

In two months, she'd graduate and no longer be under the state's control. He planned on being there to take her to Gem Haven, where she could live and take the time to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

"I'll make it up to you, Kenna," he whispered. "I promise."

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Kenna

Kingsley moved to stand beside her, and Kenna crossed her arms to avoid touching him. They wouldn't be here, waiting to see what crimes her dad committed to put him on death row at the state prison if Kingsley had told her the truth from the beginning.

As quickly as she'd lost her mom and dad when she was twelve years old, she'd just as quickly gained the Stafford men in her life. Kingsley rode in on his motorcycle and declared he'd protect her. Zane had promised the same thing to her younger sister, River.

River had gotten over Zane's part in lying to her for all those years, but Kenna refused to deal with Kingsley.

He had years to tell her the truth. How many times had she sworn her dad was alive somewhere and Kingsley had shot the idea down, telling her he was dead?

Their whole relationship was a lie.

"Turn on the computer," said Zane.

Kingsley went around the desk to the back wall where the computer sat, pushed the button, entered the password, and waited for it to load. The hum of the computer stopped.

"Ready." Kingsley swept his hair back. "What am I doing?"

"Look up the name Burt Shay," said Zane.

Kenna moved toward Kingsley to see the monitor, but she looked at Zane. "Is that my dad's real name?"

Zane nodded.

River joined her as Kingsley scrolled through the results. There were hundreds of pages. She couldn't focus on the words. Kingsley went too fast.

His broad shoulders tensed. She leaned closer.

Murder. Brutal. Massacre.

"Oh. My. God." Her stomach rolled.

She covered her mouth. That couldn't be right.

Kingsley turned in the chair and met Zane's gaze. "I think that's enough for right now." He turned off the monitor. "Let's take baby steps."

"No." Kenna lurched forward, trying to reach past him to turn the computer back on. "I want to read what it said."

He held her against his chest and backed her away from the desk, away from the truth. "Slow down."

Kenna struggled in Kingsley's strong arms, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps. "I need to know," she insisted. "I deserve to know the truth about my father."

River stepped closer, placing a comforting hand on her sister's back. "Kenna, maybe it's better if we take a moment to process this. We can look at it together, but let's just...catch our breath."

Kingsley's jaw clenched, every muscle in his body taut with tension. She wanted to push past him and look for herself. She'd imagined every possible scenario through the years when nobody believed her that her dad was alive.

She understood the headlines and could imagine the horrific details beneath them. But she needed to know what her father was living through when she was shuffled around in the foster care system, being told he was dead.

"Kenna, we'll go through everything," Kingsley said softly. "But we need to keep our heads. What you're going to read can't be unseen. You need to take more than two seconds to decide if it's in your best interest to know more or if you want to walk away and put it behind you. You need to talk with your sister and see if this is something she wants to—"

"I do," said River, squeezing her sister's hand in solidarity.

Kingsley nodded in agreement, his grip on Kenna loosening slightly. He'd already kept the truth about her dad from her. She wasn't going to let him do that to her again.

"You're not alone in this." He rubbed Kenna's back. "Whatever happens next, you have your sister and us."

With a shuddering breath, Kenna stopped struggling and leaned into Kingsley's embrace. "I just want to know."

He leaned down to push the button on the computer tower.

"Wait." Kenna turned to River, grabbing her arms. "You don't have to stay here."

She'd always tried to protect River. How many times had she tried to convince her that her dad wasn't dead and there was no reason to be sad?

Growing up, she pretended he was on a business trip or got lost in another country while on vacation. Not once had she imagined him on death row.

She even excused Zane and Kingsley's need to watch over them as something her father would've wanted. He would've made sure they remained safe if he wasn't around.

"I'm not leaving you," whispered River. "You tried to tell me he was alive, and I didn't believe you."

Now was not the time to discuss how alone she felt, fighting for something no one believed in and how there were moments, long moments, when she questioned what family meant to her.

It was hard enough to understand what she had overheard and how she'd concluded that her dad was alive.

She shook her head and squeezed her sister's hand. "It's going to be bad."

There was no sugarcoating what happened to their dad. He was waiting for the state to kill him for crimes he committed.

Together, hand in hand, they walked over to the computer.

Kingsley moved out of the chair and motioned for her to sit. Zane brought over another chair and set it in front of the monitor for River. The two brothers stood

behind them, silently supporting them while close enough to read over their shoulders.

As far as she knew, they had no idea of the crimes their dad committed, only that he'd remained on death row the entire time they were protecting her and River. She grabbed the mouse and clicked on the first Google result. A news article from Idaho Statesman newspaper.

Three days ago, forty-five year old Burt Shay entered Lehman's Mart & Gas with two automatic weapons, killing Mitch Bellow, Aaron Dixon, Shaun DeFrees, and Roy Fine. This horrific crime occurred precisely nine months after another grizzly murder outside the same business involving Shay's common-law wife.

"I didn't know Mom was murdered," whispered River.

Kenna looked away from the monitor. "What did you think happened?"

"I don't—an accident." River met her gaze. "Dad said there was an accident. I thought it was a car accident."

"I remember what he told us." Kenna inhaled a trembling breath. "I overheard him on the phone later that same night. I think he was talking to the police, and he'd gotten angry, demanding answers about why they weren't looking for the person responsible for killing his wife."

River closed her eyes, shaking her head. Kenna glanced at Kingsley. His dark gaze locked onto her, silently questioning her. She'd never told him that information because it hurt too much to replay that day in her head.

Turning back to the monitor, she scrolled online, looking for a later entry. Finding the jury's ruling, she opened the page.

The twelve jurors voted unanimously. Burt Shay was found guilty of four counts of capital murder, which carried the death penalty.

She stood and walked away from the monitor. "He wouldn't kill someone—four men, for nothing. They had to have done something to him."

River sniffed. "Maybe he went crazy after mom was killed. Maybe raising two daughters on his own, since mom was always the one who handled getting us to school and watching us when we were home, was too much for him."

Kenna turned around and looked at Kingsley. "Did they ever find my mom's killer?"

"I don't know, but I can look." He moved around the chair and sat in her place, typing on the keyboard. "What was her full name?"

"Louanne Pruitt," said Kenna and River at the same time.

As quickly as the name came, she shook her head. "Try that one and Louanne Shay."

River frowned. She shrugged. At this point, they had no idea what her parents' real names were.

She paced the office, unable to sit down. To her, her father would never be a killer.

Not the dad she remembered. He adored her mom. In the evenings, she often watched her mom sit on her dad's lap in front of the television. They never paid attention to her or the TV. They'd talk quietly, whispering in each other's ears. Her mom would smile, smothering her laughter behind her hand, while her dad's hand liked to pat her mom's hip. But she could tell by how he rocked the recliner that he was happy.

"I'm not finding anything except the reference that Burt Shay's common-law wife was

killed outside the gas station,” said Kingsley.

“Look for a murder in St. Maries without using a name.” Zane hugged River from behind. “For whatever reason, Burt Shay could’ve given his family new names. River and Kenna could be aliases he gave to the state.”

“Those are our names. I don’t remember any others,” said Kenna.

“Could he have done that?” asked River. “Birth certificates and everything?”

“Anything is possible.” Zane’s voice hardened. “At this point, we must accept that anything could’ve happened as we unravel the mess.”

“Neither name shows anything.” Kingsley swiveled in the chair and met Kenna’s gaze. “Let’s take a break and get something to eat.”

She followed everyone out of the office and into the clubhouse. The music, loud conversations, and general hum of the room made it feel as if she was walking in a dream. She couldn’t make sense of what was happening around her.

Outside, silence cloaked them.

Zane and River headed toward his motorcycle. Kenna walked straight, heading toward the bar.

“Hey.” Kingsley motioned her toward his Harley. “You can ride with—”

“I’ll walk.” She kept going, not giving him a choice.

It’d only take her a few minutes to walk down the hill. She wasn’t in the mood to be close to Kingsley. When he was around, it muddled her thinking. She had a hard

enough time as it was trying to make sense of her life.

She questioned her parents, who she was, and even her sister. All the years she'd spent separated from River had strained their relationship. Or maybe growing up had added an additional hurdle she'd have to climb over to feel the same security that she once had with River.

Maybe she'd never gain that closeness back.

Maybe too much had happened for her to return.

Trusting others would never be easy for her. Foster parents, social workers, and Kingsley had lied to her.

The rumble of the motorcycle deafened her to her thoughts. Kingsley pulled up beside her, cut the engine, and let his bike roll down the hill, keeping the machine beside her.

Ahead of them, Zane had already parked and stood with River outside the bar. She dropped her gaze to the ground, watching her step.

"Are you okay?"

Of course, she wasn't okay. Everything she knew was a lie, and her parents weren't there to make it right again. She had a hard time accepting what she read online. It felt a lot like it was happening to someone else.

"I'm fine." She continued walking.

"We need to talk." He let the bike roll ahead and stopped in her path. "Later. Tonight. Leave your bedroom unlocked."

"There's nothing to talk about." She walked around him.

He rolled after her. "I know I hurt you."

She scoffed. "You were my person."

"I know."

Before she reached her sister and Zane, she glanced at him. "I just want to eat, sleep, and forget about today."

Kingsley inhaled deeply and nodded. She squared her shoulders to hide how much it hurt that he'd accept her pushing him away so easily. Yet, if he fought for her, she'd still walk away.

She had a hard time forgiving people.

Her dad was her hero. For the last nine years, he was alive and hadn't wanted her to see him. He rather have her believe he was dead.

When a parent makes that big of a decision to hurt their child, what was she supposed to think?

If her Dad couldn't love her enough to stay in her life, how could she expect Kingsley to love her?

Page 3

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Kenna

Kenna sat in the middle of the bed with her sketchbook open. A blank, white page stared at her. Since arriving at Gem Haven, she couldn't even pick up the pencil and draw.

Now that she was stuck here, living side by side with Kingsley, he'd not only broken her heart but had also stolen her muse.

Normally, drawing was her escape, a way to express the turmoil of emotions that churned inside her. But she couldn't draw a single line since moving to the unincorporated mountain community where Gem Haven Motorcycle Club ran the bar and the campground and made up its own rules. It was as if the very essence of her had been stripped away, leaving her an empty shell.

A soft knock set Kenna on edge. Each night that week, Kingsley came to her room and tried to see her. And each night, she refused to open the door.

She might live under his roof, but she was here because her sister loved Kingsley's brother. She wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize losing her sister again.

"Kenna? It's me," said her sister from the other side of the door. "Are you sleeping?"

She put her sketchbook and pencil underneath the bed and crossed the room, unlocking the door and letting River inside.

"Kingsley's been asking about you," her sister said gently. "He's been by every night."

Her throat tightened and she nodded. She had known, of course. The way Kingsley's eyes followed her whenever he was around—she hadn't missed a thing. But she had avoided him, hiding behind helping River at the campground during the day and her pent-up anger at night. She no longer knew how to talk to him the way she had before when he was the only link to her sister.

"Are you okay?" River rubbed Kenna's arm.

Even with her sister, she found it hard to communicate. She felt more alone than ever.

"I'm fine," Kenna said, her voice flat. "I just don't have anything to say to him."

River pulled her over to the bed and gave her no chance to escape the conversation. Sitting beside her, her sister inhaled deeply. "What happened between you two?"

"I already told you I fell in love—"

"No, tell me what happened that made you hate him so much it's making you miserable."

"I don't hate him, per se."

River swept Kenna's hair behind her ear, forcing her to look at her. "I get it, sis. Knowing Zane lied to me for years about killed me , but if I'm honest with myself and roles were reversed, I'm not sure I'd tell him the truth. We were young. They were trying to protect us from something the majority of people will never have to face."

"No, the difference between you and me is that I always believed Dad was alive.

Always. Nobody wanted to listen to the truth. Kingsley—I trusted him, and despite him knowing I was right, he chose to make me feel like I was losing my mind. He was the one person who I had in my life. The only person."

River flinched, hearing the hurt behind her words. She couldn't make it any clearer. The state had separated them. They were juveniles and had no rights. It wasn't her sister's fault that they were split up.

But, Kingsley, he knew why they were put in foster care, why they were told their dad was dead. Everything was centered around her past. Every promise, every conversation, every moment they shared was built on a lie.

Including, sex.

"What made you so sure Dad was alive?" whispered River.

"Remember Ronald?"

River nodded. "He worked with Dad."

"When the social worker took us to the house and told us to fill the black bags she gave us with the things we wanted to take with us, Ronald was at the house," she said.

"I don't even remember much about that day. It all seemed like a bad dream. The social worker came to the school and took us into the office, and then we went in her car to the house." River frowned. "I don't remember Ronald being there."

Kenna grabbed River's hands, needing something tangible to hold onto. "I overheard him telling her, 'Tom wants you to keep the girls together,' and then he handed her a stack of money, which she put in her purse."

"But that doesn't prove he was alive at that time."

She squeezed her sister's hands. "Think about it. How could he have made his wishes known unless he was alive?"

River's mouth opened and closed, and she slowly nodded. "He couldn't have. God, I can't believe this."

"Do you know what Dad did for a living?" she asked.

"He worked at the warehouse." River shrugged. "We were there many times. I remember the shipping crates and all the men working while we visited there with Mom."

"That's what I remember, too." Kenna lowered her voice. "He was the boss. I know that."

"We need to find out why Mom was killed and why Dad murdered those men." River stood from the bed and paced the room. "Dad wasn't Tom Pruitt but Burt Shay. Mom was Louanne Pruitt. Who are we?"

"We're the Pruitt sisters." Kenna stood. "They can't take that away from us. We have birth certificates."

"If they're real," muttered River.

For so many years, she was alone in her thinking. She was glad to see River thinking beyond what they'd been told over the years. The life she remembered was covered in secrets and lies.

A knock startled her. Kenna looked at River and shook her head, not wanting her to

tell Zane what they talked about in private. She feared everything getting back to Kingsley, and she knew he hated it when she talked about her dad.

River walked across the room and opened the door. Zane stood in the hallway. Kenna turned her back on them, inhaling a deep breath. The more they uncovered about her parents, the more questions they needed answered.

"Kenna?" said Zane.

She turned around.

"We're running short at the bar. Have you ever served food?" Zane stayed in the doorway.

She nodded. Today was River's day off from the campground, which meant she wouldn't be going with her sister.

"Do you want to fill in at the bar for the next few days?" Zane pulled out a wad of cash, peeled off three hundred dollars, and held them out. "You can keep the tips, too."

"Trust me." River raised her brows and grinned. "The bikers give good money."

"Sure." She slipped the money into her pocket. "What hours?"

"You can start at one o'clock and work until ten tonight. You'll get an hour for lunch from six until seven." He dipped his chin. "When you get there, check in with Lori in the kitchen, and she'll get you set up and show you around."

"Okay."

"Appreciate it." Zane leaned down and kissed River. "I'm going to the clubhouse. Come on up when you finish here."

River glanced at Kenna. She motioned for her to go with Zane. They could talk later.

Feeling more positive after the talk with River, Kenna got dressed in her best jeans and a low-cut blouse. She understood how tips worked. The sexier she dressed, the more money flowed her way.

She tied her hair back and added eyeliner, going heavier than usual. A surge of determination filled her.

A lot had happened that week. The job at the bar would help the time pass faster.

The prison called two days ago and let Zane know that Burt Shay had accepted his request to visit him, and the form he'd turned in had gone in front of the judge and been approved—unlike regular incarcerated inmates, all death row inmates needed to go through the pre-approval process. No one expected the answer to happen so fast. According to the prison, it usually took up to three months for a judge to review and grant or deny the request.

At a quarter to one o'clock, she walked out of the bedroom and almost smacked into Kingsley in the hallway. She gasped, throwing herself back, but two strong hands pulled her forward. Caught off balance, she grabbed onto his leather vest to keep from falling.

Her eyes locked with his. The tight grip on her arms sent a shiver down her spine. Heat radiated from his body, mingling with her own, and her breath hitched in her throat.

His gaze roamed her face, lingering on her lips. She swallowed hard, catching the

flicker of desire in his eyes.

"Sorry," whispered Kenna, her voice barely audible, but she made no move to step back.

"Are you okay?" His hands slid down her arms, leaving a trail of fire in their wake, and then he released her, but the electric charge between them remained.

She took a deep breath, steadying her racing heart. The way he looked at her with such intensity made it impossible to relax.

Kingsley stepped back. His eyes never left her. "You look good."

Her cheeks flushed. She rubbed her upper arms. The imprint of his hands on her skin lingered long after he no longer touched her.

She walked past him, feeling his gaze on her back. It took all her willpower not to turn around and look at him again.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

—Eight Years Ago—

The double-car garage blocked the house from Kingsley's view. He put his finger to his lips, signaling Kenna to stay quiet and not give him away.

The voices of her foster parents floated through the air quietly and then disappeared. He stuck his head around the corner, making sure they were in the house, and then motioned for Kenna to hurry toward him.

Her expression changed to excitement, and she ran, almost colliding with him. "You found me."

"Told you I would." He leaned forward, bracing his hands on his knees. "Go on inside and make some excuse to come out again, and we can talk for a few minutes."

"They won't care if I hang around outside. They're going to some party tonight anyway." She walked backward. "Just don't leave. I'll be right back. Stay there."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

He nodded, easing her worries. From the start, he saw through her attitude to the

scared girl, lost in the system. It'd taken her a good year before she started talking to him about what went on in her life. Until recently, she viewed him indifferently, much like her social worker or a teacher at her school.

Five minutes later, she came running around the corner of the garage and thrust a candy bar in front of him. "I took one for you, too."

"Thanks." He ripped open the wrapper and looked at the bar. "What is this? Oatmeal?"

"Granola."

He grunted. Since he'd eaten most of his meals at the bar in Gem Haven since he was little, he'd never eaten one before. He took a bite and latched on to the chocolate chip inside the dry crunch.

"Do you like it?" Kenna broke off a piece and put the other half of the bar in her back pocket.

"It's okay." He pointed at her hip. "Why aren't you eating yours?"

"I'm saving it until later." She wrinkled her nose. "They're leaving me meatloaf from last night to eat while they go out." She shuddered. "I hate meatloaf."

He rewrapped his granola bar and handed it to her. "You can have part of mine, too."

"Thanks."

"How's school?" He tilted his head. "Have you made friends?"

She shook her head.

He looked across the street at the other two-story houses. "Nice neighborhood. I bet there are kids around here you could play with."

"I'm thirteen. I don't play." She brushed off her hands.

"What do you do after school?"

"Draw."

"Yeah?" He leaned against the garage. "What kind of things do you draw?"

"Lots of things." She moved beside him and put her back against the building. "Trees and horses."

"You like horses?"

She looked at the ground. "What happens to horses if their owners don't come back?"

He looked away, feeling the desperation in her question. Without asking, he knew she must've had a horse before the state took her into the system.

It was a hell of a situation. He swallowed, thinking of something that would make her feel better.

"My dad paid to have my horse stabled, but nobody is paying the bill," she whispered.

"To be honest, I don't know." He exhaled. "I can find out, though. Do you know the name of the stables?"

"Maryhill Stables." Kenna turned to him. "Can you really find out?"

Even better, if he could track down the horse, he'd pay to have it boarded until he could figure out a way to reunite Kenna with her horse. Maybe that would put a smile on her face.

"No promises, but I'll try." He caressed her cheek. "What's your horse's name?"

"Luxy."

It would be easy to call the clubhouse, talk to Razz or Snack, and find out in a matter of seconds if an abandoned horse was left at the stables. But he had a feeling nothing good would come from his phone call. He wouldn't break Kenna's heart and leave her to deal with another disappointment.

"Why do you keep coming to see me?"

He chuckled. "Everyone needs someone in their life that's always there. I'm your person."

"For how long?"

"For however long you need me."

"Are you a social worker?" She tilted her head.

"Do I look like a social worker?" He grunted in amusement when she wrinkled her nose. "Nah, just someone who will make sure you're safe and taken care of."

"Why?"

"Because you need me."

Her brows pinched, and she studied him. Kenna wasn't going to take him at face value. She was smart and had a good head on her shoulders.

Unfortunately, life was often cruel to those who could see beyond what was happening around them.

"What happens when I get moved to a different foster family?"

"I'll find you."

She shook her head and looked away from him. "No, you won't."

He'd prove to her that she could count on him. It'd take time but he wasn't going anywhere.

Being a Stafford meant you never walk away from promises. And when a favor was owed, it got paid.

"Kenna?" yelled a woman.

She flinched. "That's my foster mom."

"You better go before you get in trouble."

She hesitated. He motioned his chin, sending her on her way. Hidden out of sight, he put a cigarette in his mouth. Once it was clear, he'd leave.

A car engine purred. He glanced around the corner of the garage and caught sight of a vehicle backing out of the driveway. Stepping into the shadows, he waited until they drove away before walking into view. He'd parked his Harley at the corner next to the curb so as not to bring attention to himself.

The sunset cast a long shadow ahead of him as he walked down the concrete driveway. As he reached the road, a screen door creaked open behind him.

"Kingsley!" Kenna's voice carried across the yard, filled with urgency and a hint of desperation.

He turned to find her booking it across the grass with her slim arms swinging. In view of the neighbors, he needed to get her inside before someone questioned why he was visiting a young girl when her parents weren't home.

"Can you give this to your brother? Maybe he could give it to my sister." She held out a notebook. "Tell her...tell her I love her."

"I'll make sure she gets it." He took the book and held it to his heart. "Go inside, lock the door, and I'll see you again soon."

The tension in her slim shoulders eased. With a small wave, she turned and ran to the safety of the house. He took a deep breath and walked away.

At the corner, he stopped at his motorcycle and thumbed through the book. Even in the dim light, he could make out rather good drawings of what could only be Kenna and her sister, her horse, and depictions of their life together.

He closed the pages and slipped it inside his duffle. Those girls never asked for the life they were given.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

Big John stood at the door of the house. Kingsley handed the vice president the money pouch. Today was payday for the members of Gem Haven Motorcycle Club.

"Ask Razz for the payout sheet." He looked beyond Big John up the hill to the clubhouse. "Tell the others Zane will be around in a few hours."

"He's not back yet?" Big John put the pouch under his arm.

"Visitation was later than usual."

He left the explanation brief, letting Big John believe the visit was to Ridge Stafford. It was no one's business that Zane would meet Burt Shay.

"No worries. I'll make sure the men get their pay."

"Thanks." He slapped Big John on the shoulder. "We've got an early morning ride. Let everyone know."

He shut the door and went back into the rec room. Kenna and River sat together at the end of the L-shaped couch. Both women jumped at his return. They were like two feral cats in a box, waiting for Zane to return with words from their dad.

Kingsley picked up the bottle of beer he'd opened an hour ago and chugged half the

contents. The girls were worried about the repercussions of finding out their dad was alive and on death row.

The father they knew was not the father they had, and that was a hard fact to accept.

He and Zane played right into the hands of Ridge Stafford and Tom Pruitt AKA Burt Shay. No one knew the motive of the favor.

His dad was nine months away from getting paroled. It wouldn't take much to fuck that up, and he'd be in there for five more years.

The MC needed their president back.

Zane had done more than expected during Dad's absence, growing the club in numbers and wealth. But his older brother never wanted to sit at the head of the table. Ridge Stafford made it crystal clear he planned to return and lead the club after his prison sentence.

Kingsley studied Kenna and River, their tense posture and fearful glances, a reminder of the countless nights they'd spent on edge, waiting for any news from their father. He wished he could offer them some solace, but the truth was, he had no fucking clue what was going on.

His first job was to protect Gem Haven from any backlash from Zane's visit with Burt Shay. The club was in a precarious position, and any misstep could lead to catastrophe.

River tensed, swinging her gaze toward the window. The rumble of an approaching motorcycle filtered through the room. Kingsley walked over and looked outside. His brother had returned.

"Zane's here." Hope failed to hide the tremor in River's voice.

He turned from the window and met Kenna's gaze. For a heartbeat, she'd unmasked her fears before preparing herself for whatever news came.

The door opened. Heavy boots thunked against the hardwood floor. He turned as Zane walked into the room. His brother went straight to River, putting his hand at the back of her neck before he met Kingsley's gaze and blinked once— something they used to do as children to signal they were in trouble.

"Tell us everything." River pulled Zane toward the couch.

Kenna hung back, sitting at the other end, away from her sister. Kingsley stood behind the couch, silently giving her the support she needed—even if that's not what she wanted. He'd touch her, but the way she stayed coiled up tighter than a spring, she'd bolt on him.

Zane rubbed his thumb along River's cheek. "He's got your eyes."

River gasped, holding Zane's hand. "What did Dad say? Did you ask him if we could see him? Did he tell you why he killed those men? Did he tell you if he's okay?"

"Slow down, sweetheart." Zane pulled on his beard. "First off, prison doesn't allow you to have open conversations. Two guards were present the whole time, and we talked over the phone with a piece of Plexiglass between us. I didn't ask him why he was in prison. You already know why going by what we learned online."

Kenna stiffened. Kingsley put his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged, trying to displace his touch, but he refused to let her go. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed him. Hearing about her dad was hard on her.

"He asked if you both were okay." Zane looked over at Kenna. "He wanted to know where you were living, and I told him you were living in Gem Haven."

"Can we see him?" blurted River.

Kingsley squeezed Kenna's shoulders. Usually, she was the one full of questions. The one who vehemently fought everyone to prove her dad was alive. Her lack of questions or emotions worried him.

"Your dad needs time to think about a visit. I'm sure he'll let us know soon," said Zane.

Kenna stood and rushed out of the room. The front door slammed shut.

Kingsley went after her. Outside, he spotted her race-walking toward the other side of the garage. There was nothing over there, except pine trees and rocky terrain. Setting out after her on foot, he kept his distance, letting her work through the hurt.

Pulling a cigarette out of his pack, he lit the end and slowed his stroll. There was more that Zane wasn't saying, and he'd find out what was going on later. Right now, Kenna needed to process what little info she received and accept that her dad had the final say in whether she got to see him or not.

Kenna stopped abruptly, turning to face Kingsley with fire in her eyes. "Why does he act like we meant nothing to him?"

"I'm sure it's not that simple." He took a slow drag from his cigarette, exhaling the smoke with deliberate calmness to settle her down.

"Not that simple?" Her voice echoed against the mountains. "He killed people, knowing he'd be taken away from us. Why doesn't he love me? What did I do

wrong?"

The anguish in her voice pierced him. He stubbed his cigarette out on the thigh of his jeans and reached out, wishing he could take away her pain. "I don't think this has anything to do with something you did or didn't do. Your dad has his demons that can blind him to what's right in front of him."

"That's no excuse," she shouted, clenching her fists at her sides.

"No, it's not," he said softly. "You deserve answers."

Kenna's shoulders sagged. The fight drained out of her as quickly as it had come. "I just want to understand," she whispered. "I want to know why he'd do something like that. I want to know how he could forget about me and River."

He wrapped her in a protective embrace. She buried her face in his chest. Looking off into the trees, he had no quick answer for her. But he was certain of one thing. Kenna wouldn't be alone.

He kissed the top of her head. "Do you want to go back inside?"

She inhaled deeply and looked up at him. "My sister doesn't need me."

"What would make you say that?"

She shrugged. "She has Zane."

Right now, Kenna couldn't see through the storm that rained down on her. But one day, she would.

He picked up her hand and held it. "I'll go back to the house with you. You can ask

Zane all your questions about your dad, okay?"

She walked with him, and that time, she never pulled away from him.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

Zane paced back and forth in the office at the clubhouse, his leather vest creaking with each step. Kingsley drummed a steady rhythm on the desk with his fingers, matching the noise. Both were acutely aware of the dangerous game Burt Shay orchestrated from his cell on death row.

"How the hell does Shay manage to control others? He's got one foot in the grave." Kingsley growled.

Zane paused, running his hand through his hair. "He's got connections, or at least he did."

"How come we never heard about him?"

"Does it really surprise you that Dad crossed Shay's path." Zane ran his hands down his face. "He obviously has something on Dad, which makes him dangerous to Gem Haven."

"You'd think if Shay's that powerful, he'd have more people. He would've had one of them watch over River and Kenna," he said.

His brother met his gaze. "Bigger chance of the truth getting out. His number one concern was keeping the girls from learning he's on death row. He was visibly shaken when he mentioned their names."

"Well, I think it's a bullshit answer the way he told you he'd think about letting River and Kenna see him in prison." He balled his hand and punched the top of the desk. "He might as well come out and tell them he no longer loves them. Our dad's a hard ass, but can you imagine him turning his back on us?"

Zane shook his head. "I'm at the point where I'm not sure it's the smartest thing to have the girls go to the prison and see Shay."

"You'd stop them?" Kingsley crossed his arms. "I don't know about River, but all Kenna wants to do is see her dad. Even if things go south, I'd rather be there to help her through the trauma than hurt her by keeping anymore from her."

"No, I get it." Zane took out a cigarette and tossed the pack to Kingsley. After lighting the smoke, he said, "I'd be stupid if I didn't worry about blowback. I don't know enough about Shay's organization to know if I should be worried about Gem Haven or if I can handle any trouble that comes our way."

"At least Valdones Motorcycle Club backed off us." Kingsley inhaled deeply and exhaled the smoke into the air. "We need to look forward. Protect the club from anything Shay can throw at us, and make sure Dad stays protected inside prison."

"We bought the weapons at a good time." Zane met his gaze. "I want the girls kept on Gem Haven."

"Agreed."

"I noticed Kenna was sticking close to you. Has she forgiven you?" asked Zane.

"Nah." He took a bigger drag off the cigarette. "But I'm not going anywhere. She'll have to face me at some point."

Zane muttered, "Are we really protecting them by letting them see Shay? What if it messes them up even more?"

Kingsley grabbed the ashtray and stubbed out the cigarette. "We can't shield them from everything. They're no longer twelve years old. As much as we hate it, maybe letting them face the hard truth is the only way they'll heal."

A knock ended the conversation. Big John came in and lifted his chin.

The frown on the big guy's face filled the room with tension. Usually, nothing rattled Big John.

"What's going on?" asked Zane.

"We've got a problem." Big John extracted an envelope out of his vest pocket. "Your dad, years back, told me if he was gone and I ever received a pine tree branch in front of my door, I was supposed to deliver this envelope to his sons."

Before Zane took the envelope, he said, "Do you know what this is about?"

"Not a clue but considering Prez—Ridge told me that he'd kill me himself if I fucked up, I'm assuming whatever is inside isn't good." Big John shook his head. "I sure wish he was here instead of locked up. That has nothing to do with you two running the club. My loyalty is to Gem Haven. I've been around a lot of years. I got a bad feeling we've got trouble coming to the mountain."

Zane took the message, thanked Big John, and walked him to the door. "I appreciate your allegiance to Gem Haven."

His brother shut the door. Kingsley stood from the chair, curious about the note his dad had set up before serving his prison sentence.

Zane shook his head. "Since when do we communicate with fucking tree branches?"

"Not to mention, how did anyone get close enough to his door without him noticing? He has his place booby-trapped. Even I won't go out there." Kingsley crossed his arms.

Zane stuck his finger under the flap and ripped the envelope open. He pulled out a sheet of paper and unfolded it.

Zane grunted. "It's from Dad."

"Read it," said Kingsley.

"Sons — I need you to protect Zora. She lives in the old hunter's cabin northeast of Gem Haven on the other side of the mountain. I expect you to safeguard her. She is as important to me as Gem Haven. She'll argue that she needs no help, but remind her that what I say goes. Put someone outside the cabin twenty-four/seven. I ask for this protection because I believe there will be blowback from our failure to keep Tom Pruitt's daughters from learning the truth. If all hell breaks loose, get Zora to Gem Haven and put her in the house. Once you get this message, show up on visiting day at the prison."

Zane looked up from the letter. "Who the fuck is Zora?"

"Maybe the better question is why does Dad think she's as important as the club?" He shook his head.

"Do you know where the old hunter's cabin is?" Zane folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope before putting it in bottom drawer and locking it.

"Sure do." He scoffed. "I haven't been in that area since I was twelve-thirteen years

old."

"Can you ride over there and check it out?"

The last thing he wanted was to do another favor for his dad. He still hadn't recovered from the previous favor he helped Ridge Stafford with. Kenna was still avoiding him.

"Dad's been locked up for years. We need to find out if someone is staying in the cabin. The chick could've left a long time ago," said Zane.

"That would be just like him, hiding a woman away in a cabin so he wouldn't have to share her with the other members." Kingsley inhaled deeply. "He was always sneaking off, probably fooling around in private."

"Hopefully, we're not dealing with a dead body. Dad's been locked up for more than a decade. That's a long time for a woman to wait for him."

"I'll take one of the dirt bikes." Kingsley paused. "Never mind, I'll take one of the side-by-sides and see if Kenna wants to go with me."

"She's working at the bar."

"We won't be long." He walked out of the office, more confused than before by the new information they had received from their dad.

Smoker threw a football across the main room of the clubhouse. Kingsley intercepted it and tossed the ball back as he went out the front door. Outside, Bank walked with his girlfriend toward him. Stella carried their newborn in her arms.

"Hey." Smoker put his arm around his girlfriend. "Look who came to see me."

He peered at the baby and grinned. "Cute kid, brother."

"Thank fuck she looks like her mama, right?" Smoker laughed.

"You said that, not me." He slapped Smoker in the stomach. "I'll see you later. Take care of that family of yours."

He rode his Harley to the house and then walked over to the bar. Inside, half the tables were full. Wanting to take Kenna with him to check out the cabin was just an excuse to spend time with her.

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Kenna

Kingsley stepped inside the bar, looked around, and headed toward the counter. Kenna focused on the flow of beer filling the mug, even though she'd spotted him the second he walked inside.

She shut off the tap and added the beer to the tray. "Rebecca? Drinks are ready."

"Thanks, sweets." Rebecca picked up the tray with ease and walked out onto the floor.

Kenna used the towel and wiped the drips from the drain grid. Without looking, she sensed Kingsley standing in front of her.

"Do you know what you'd like to order?" she asked, avoiding his eyes.

"You."

Her neck warmed. She refused to show him how needy she was for his attention. It'd been hell living at the house, knowing he slept under the same roof.

"Take a break and come with me."

"I can't. I'm working." She looked at his brown eyes and wished she hadn't.

Her chest hurt. The ache that dwelled inside of her grew each day she had to live without him.

"I'll clear it with Lori." He winked. "I'll even make sure you get paid."

"Kingsley, don't," she muttered, frowning.

He walked into the kitchen, not allowing her to tell him no. She walked to the back shelf, picked up the box of napkins, and refilled the two closest dispensers. The idea of going anywhere alone with Kingsley filled her with butterflies.

She half hoped he'd whisk her away and half dreaded spending time with him.

The door opened, and Lori stepped out of the kitchen. After searching the room, she pointed at Kenna. "Take a break."

"But—"

"Go." Lori shook her head and shooed her with her hands.

Exhaling swiftly, she set down the box. Kingsley walked over to her and held out his hand. She wasn't going to give him more to gloat about, so she kept her hands to herself as she walked out the front door.

"Can you tell me what we're doing?" she asked.

He pointed downhill to the garage where a UTV sat in front of the building. "I need to check something out on the other side of the mountain and want company."

"Ask one of your biker buddies," she said.

"It's not their company I want." He walked to the side-by-side. "Hop in and buckle up, brat."

She eyed the seat. There wasn't much room for both of them. She'd need to touch him to fit inside.

He folded himself behind the steering wheel and patted the seat. "Come on. Time's a wastin'."

"You sound old, saying that." She slid into the seat.

He reached around her, grabbed the seatbelt, and locked her in, meeting her gaze. "Compared to you, I am."

The vehicle roared to life, and Kingsley shot forward, going in a wide circle before heading straight toward the trees. She grabbed the seat, afraid he'd run them into the trunk of one of the big pines.

He swerved, going over a bump, sending the UTV bouncing. "Hang on. It'll get smoother."

She couldn't answer. Her teeth knocked together. Afraid they'd tip out of the vehicle, she braced herself.

He slowed and drove around a tree. Her body stopped bouncing and she pulled her fingernails out of the seat cushion.

"How far are we going?" she yelled over the loud engine.

"Half an hour or so."

She frowned. That was longer than a fifteen-minute break. Rebecca was going to be pissed. The dinner crowd from the campground was due soon.

He drove the vehicle higher onto the mountain. The trees thinned, and rock cropping lined the dirt trail. There were definitely two tire tracks in the ground, but wild grass and flowers had grown in their path.

A hawk swooped down and landed on a tree in front of them. She looked up as they passed. Every day, there were wild animals in Gem Haven. If it wasn't deer and elk coming close to nibble on vegetation, it was a moose that drank out of the trough at the campground.

The UTV tilted, and they headed downhill. She glanced over her shoulder. It looked as if they'd reached the top and planned to go down the other side of the mountain.

Kingsley palmed her thigh, squeezing her leg. She jumped, more ticklish than startled. Before she could question why he touched her, he slowed to a stop and shut off the side-by-side.

He unclicked her seatbelt. "Jump out."

He left her unbalanced. Do this. Don't do this. Come here. Go there. She had no time to prepare herself for spending time with him.

She stepped over a small bush, trying to get her bearings on how to get to where Kingsley stood, peering down the mountain. Saplings dotted the land. She wouldn't want to step on a baby tree.

She worked her way to his side, followed his line of vision, and spotted what had grabbed his attention. A quaint cabin sat in a grove below them, much like the cabins lined up behind the clubhouse. There were raised flowerbeds in seven neat rows.

Laundry hung from a clothesline at the side of the cabin.

She glanced at Kingsley, wondering why he'd bring her here. He wasn't happy. There was a defined frown etched into his face.

"I need to talk to the woman who lives in the cabin." He picked up her hand. "I want you to stay beside me."

"Woman?"

He glanced at her and grinned. "Jealous?"

"As if." She rolled her eyes.

His expression shifted, and he caressed the back of her head, pulling her closer and kissing her forehead. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking in that tenderness she'd missed from him.

"You have nothing to worry about. It's club business." He moved, leading her by the hand.

She followed him over the uneven ground, descending the mountain until they stepped into a clearing. Kingsley looked around and then approached the cabin.

"Hello?" he shouted. "Anyone home?"

No one answered. He stepped to the door and knocked against the thick wood. Kenna clung to his free hand. Despite the quaintness of the home and the beautiful array of flowers growing all around her, she couldn't imagine anyone living so far from civilization. There were no power lines to the dwelling, no road, no car. The woman must live off the land—and that was unimaginable to her.

"You're trespassing."

Kingsley turned, sweeping his arm out and putting Kenna behind him. "We're not here to hurt you."

"Then, you better walk out the way you walked in," said a woman.

Kenna peeked out from behind Kingsley, hiding her surprise. The woman, probably fifty years old, pointed a rake at them.

"I'm Ridge Stafford's son," said Kingsley.

"I didn't ask you to come here." The woman's tone never changed. "I only contacted Big John because your dad wanted me to. I don't need anyone coming around. Just leave me in peace."

"You have contact with my dad?" asked Kingsley.

The woman lowered the garden tool. "We write."

From everything she'd heard about Zane's dad, she never pictured him writing a letter. She stepped to the side to get a better view of the woman.

She was beautiful in a down-to-earth way. Her long black hair, sprinkled with gray, hung to her waist. She wore jeans, cowgirl boots, and a white top with short sleeves that moved with the breeze. She was tall and slim. Her confidence was off the chart.

"Dad asked us to secure the cabin." Kingsley paused. "That includes protecting you."

"I don't—"

"If you know my dad, you also know you have no say in what he wants done." Zane reached for Kenna's hand. "There will be someone from Gem Haven Motorcycle Club around. I'll make sure they know not to bother you unless there is trouble. You can speak with anyone from the club. If you need to contact me or Zane, just let a member know, and they'll send us a message." Zane looked around him. "If you'd feel safer, you're welcome to stay—"

"I'm fine here," she said.

Zane dipped his chin. "If you see anyone, let us know."

He stepped away from the woman, leading Kenna away. She hurried to keep up with his longer stride, more confused about what they were doing here after overhearing the conversation. Why would Kingsley's dad want the woman protected? Was it not safe here?

After the recent arsonists setting fire to the mountain, the new hint of danger set her on edge.

Once they reached the UTV, Kenna grabbed onto the rollbar and caught her breath from the hike up the mountain. She wanted to ask Kingsley what was happening, but that would have invited him to talk to her. She wasn't ready to open a line of communication between them yet.

Kingsley peered down at the cabin. She looked for the woman, but there was no sign of her.

She couldn't stop herself. "Is the woman in danger?"

"I don't know." Kingsley hooked her behind the neck and dragged her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her. "Dad wants us to watch her."

"Does that upset you?" Her concern for him kept her from pulling away.

He was tense and quiet, which usually meant he was thinking too much. She'd seen him do it many times before and hated it when he shut himself off from her. He'd always tell her it was grown-up problems and nothing she should bother herself with.

But she was an adult now.

"I don't know," he muttered again. "There's something about her that..."

She waited, but he never finished. "What?"

"She looks familiar." He kissed Kenna's forehead. "Probably just one of the bitches that used to hang around the clubhouse years ago." He sighed. "Nothing to worry about."

"I should go back to work. It's unfair to Lori and Rebecca to cover for me this long." She stepped away from him and rubbed the chill off her arms. "Zane gave me the job because you need more help in the bar. I don't want to disappoint him."

He grabbed her hands and pulled her toward him, claiming her mouth. She grabbed his vest and hung on as the intensity of having his lips on her made her bones weak. It was as if he tried to erase all her worries with that one kiss, to communicate everything he couldn't say to make up for lying to her for years.

When he pulled back, his dark eyes searched hers, filled with mixed emotions she couldn't understand. "Miss you, brat," he whispered, his voice rougher than usual. "Stop pushing me away."

Her resolve wavered, and she nodded slowly, letting herself sink back into his embrace.

"I need you," he murmured against her hair.

She nestled closer to him, finding comfort in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "I need you, too," she whispered back.

They stood in silence, not talking about the past or the future. She held on to him as if the world no longer existed.

It was a fragile peace he offered her, but in that instant, it was enough.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kenna

—Four Years Ago—

"Shut up!"

Dishes clattered. "Sit down.

A cupboard door slammed shut. A baby cried.

Kenna glanced around for one of the adults. After dinner, there was always chaos in the group home. Twenty-four girls, from infants to seventeen years old, lived in the building, with four people in each room.

"I'll tell if you leave." Samantha sat on the top bunk, swinging her feet. "You'll go to juvie."

Juvenile Hall wasn't a threat. She'd been there once before when they couldn't find a foster home for her.

"If you leave, I'm going with you." Bethany scrambled off her bed. "I'm not staying here."

"You're eight years old. You're not coming with me." Kenna looked at Samantha, who was a threat at sixteen years old. "Go ahead and rat me out, and I'll tell them how

your boyfriend meets up with you every day after school."

"Bitch," muttered Samantha.

She opened the door a crack and checked the hallway. Once the coast was clear, she hurried to the stairs and squeezed into the space between two bookcases, listening for anyone approaching. The front door was the easiest way to sneak out after dinner. Once she returned, she'd come through the kitchen door left open for Ramona, who stayed late to help with the infants.

She popped out of her hiding spot and opened the door, shutting it softly behind her. No one could hear her in the house with all the screaming and crying. And what would they do if she was caught sneaking out? Send her away?

It wouldn't matter where she went. In another year, she'd be on her own. She'd get a job, save money for a year until River graduated, and then they could look for their dad together.

She looked behind her. Nobody followed.

Bending over, she pulled up her pant leg and grabbed the cell phone she hid in her sock. At the group home, she kept the phone hidden in her binder in her backpack. Ms. Guilly never went through her schoolwork but inspected their beds and the closet daily. Some of the girls that arrived tried to bring drugs into the house. All phones found were confiscated.

Ever since Kingsley gave her the phone, she'd hidden it from everyone. Everyone except her art teacher, Miss Meade.

During class, Miss Meade would let her charge the phone as long as she completed her work. Since art class was her favorite subject and she loved to draw, it was easy

to stay on task.

She pushed Kingsley's contact number and walked faster. When he picked up the call, she said, "I'm out."

"Good girl. Hang tight. I'll be there in a few."

She disconnected the call, unable to hide her smile. Everything inside of her felt lighter and happier. The days Kingsley came to see her were her favorite days. He was her best-kept secret. Every foster home she went to never found out about him.

The group home proved to be the most challenging place for him to visit. There were too many people around all the time. But she was older now, and it was worth the risk of getting caught sneaking out to have a chance to spend time with him.

At the corner, she stopped, looking left and right. Before she spotted him, she heard his Harley. The rumble of his motorcycle was loud and deep, making her chest thrum.

She rocked on the edge of the curb, anxious for him to get to her.

The moment he pulled up beside her, she shoved her phone in her pocket and took the helmet he handed her. She'd rode with him many times. With him, she felt free and happy.

He never spoke; he only winked and gave her that grin as if she were his favorite person when he handed her a helmet. She climbed on behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist, grabbed his belt, and held on. The motorcycle shot forward. A thrill swept through her, prickling her skin.

After what felt like an exhilarating journey through the town, they reached the outskirts, away from the street lights. The wind whipped past her. She loved feeling

the world blur around her. Having Kingsley here was a splash of adventure and safety all at once.

Kingsley slowed, stopping at their secret spot—a hidden clearing by the river, surrounded by towering cedar trees.

She hopped off the motorcycle and removed the helmet. Her hair fell in her eyes, and she brushed the strands back with her hand, uncaring about how she looked.

Kingsley swung his leg over the seat of the Harley and shared a smile with her. She threw her arms around him and squeezed. "I missed you."

He was a piece of her life now. As much as her mom, dad, and sister.

He set her away from him and pulled out a thin box from the inside pocket of his leather jacket. She stepped closer.

"For you," he said.

"Me?" She unwrapped it eagerly and found a set of colored pencils.

Emotions closed her throat. She ran her thumb over the box. They were the same kind of pencils Miss Meade used.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I thought you could use them." He cupped her cheek. "Why don't we sit on the rocks, and you can tell me how you've been doing before I have to take you back to the group home."

She sat down on the river rock, side by side with him. During the stolen moments

with Kingsley, she learned what happiness felt like.

Kenna

The low rumble from the motorcycles up the hill at the clubhouse provided background noise in the house. Kenna hugged her pillow and stared across the room at the door.

After riding to the woman's cabin that afternoon and working at the bar all evening, she'd come straight home, knowing what she wanted. She showered and slid into bed naked, leaving the door unlocked for the first time since Kingsley brought her to Gem Haven.

Having a little piece of Kingsley only made her want more of him. She missed having him in her life. She was tired of being mad, tired of hurting, tired of having him close but so far away.

Nothing about her life was easy. Her dad was on death row, going to die. Her sister was grown and in love with Zane. The future she always dreamed about was no longer in front of her.

She'd locked the door on the man she loved. Purposely keeping the door unlocked was a silent invitation, one she wasn't sure Kingsley would take after she'd turned him away repetitively since the truth came out.

Her heart fluttered like a caged bird, echoing the rhythm of the engines that grew closer to the house. As she stared at the door in the dark, she heard the soft creak of

footsteps in the hallway.

The door opened. Kingsley stepped into the room, searching the darkness in silence.

He stepped forward, each movement slow and deliberate. Close enough to see him, Kenna spotted the hunger in his gaze. It was the same craving she had for him. God, she needed him.

He slid into the bed beside her. She wiggled toward the warmth of his body and slid her hand down his chest to his buckle.

His swift intake of air turned her on. She unbuckled his belt. The clink echoed through the room like the unlocking of a cell door.

"Be sure, Kenna," he murmured, the words a hoarse whisper in the quiet. "I can't handle another rejection."

With a determination that surprised even her, she kissed him deeply, tasting the desperation in his mouth. "I'm sure," she murmured against his lips.

He undid his jeans, pushing them down and kicking the material off his legs. She ran her hands over his bare chest. He'd come to her almost naked and that excited her. She moved her hands down to his sides, to his hips, to his thighs.

Her frantic need to caress and tangle her body with his was slowed by Kingsley kissing her neck. His hands explored every inch. She was no longer in control of her body and arched into him.

Digging her nails into his back and putting her leg over his hip, she pulled herself closer.

His cock pushed against her inner thigh. She moaned, moving against him. Everything about him brought her comfort. Around him, she belonged. She wasn't alone. She wasn't someone's paycheck. She wasn't in the way. She wasn't in trouble.

She was wanted and desired and loved .

Kingsley pulled back, reaching around him for the jeans he'd kicked off. Taking his wallet out of his back pocket, he removed a condom and tossed the billfold to the floor. She used that time to rub her hands up and down his bare stomach.

"I need you." He rolled the protection on.

"I need you, too."

"You don't understand." He kneeled on the bed. "I need you hard ."

She propped herself on her elbows, unsure of what he expected of her. While they'd had sex—wonderful sex, she had no idea about his wants and needs and kinks. She really had no idea what went on in a healthy relationship. All she felt was an insatiable need to be with him every second of the day.

"O—kay," she whispered.

"You'll like it. Trust me." He held out his hands and pulled her up to a sitting position. "Roll over and get on your hands and knees."

She turned and propped herself on her hands. He grabbed her hips, pulled her toward him, and then slid his hand between her legs. Her head snapped up, and she fisted the blanket at the surge of pleasure spreading through her.

He rubbed his cock against her wetness. She rocked on her knees, trying to plunge

onto the hardness.

Kingsley grabbed her hips, pulled her back, and thrust into her. Her back arched, making room for the length of him. She panted, shocked at the way he filled her.

While inside of her, he reached around her hip and found her clit with his fingers, rubbing, circling, caressing. She closed her eyes, bracing against each plunge. Holding herself still because if she moved, if she gave in, if she breathed, she'd orgasm.

She was right there.

On the edge.

Desperate to come.

Stubborn as all hell because she wanted the feeling to go on and on. She wouldn't lose.

His body slapped against her ass. Skin on skin.

No, his balls. His balls slapped her clit. His hand had moved. Where was his hand?

His strokes came faster and harder. She pursed her lips, breathing through her teeth. That's what he'd meant by hard. Yes. Yes. She liked that. Mm. No. God, she loved that.

He grounded against her, holding her in front of him, manipulating and playing her. She moaned. Her pussy throbbed, squeezing down on him. She couldn't stop. Her body rolled tighter. She groaned, pushing against the orgasm, but it was too big, too strong.

Pleasure exploded throughout her. She arched, bucking against Kingsley. He thrust inside of her, riding her orgasm and grunting out his climax.

Electrical shocks pulsed through her as her body released her. She let her head fall between her arms, trying to catch her breath.

Kingsley's fingers loosened on her hips and he caressed the abused skin. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said but no sound came out. She cleared her throat. "Yes."

He pulled out of her. Unable to support her body, she flopped onto her stomach on the bed and exhaled loudly. He slapped her butt and moved off the bed.

Kingsley returned to the bed and stretched out beside her. She turned her head, needing to see what he was thinking.

He caressed her naked back and murmured, "I'm so fucking sorry."

"No more secrets," she whispered. "No more lies. Even if it hurts, I need to know everything."

Kingsley nodded, leaning over to kiss her. "I'll give you that. No more secrets."

The words hung in the air. It was a fragile bridge they'd built tonight, but a bond they could strengthen with time.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "But I want this. I want us."

He inhaled deeply and rested his forehead on her head. "Me, too," he breathed. "More than anything."

Kingsley

Razz walked out of the clubhouse's office after getting orders to take one of the quads to the other side of the mountain. Kingsley looked at Zane and shook his head. They were wasting a lot of manpower watching Zora.

They had no sign of trouble. Not around the woman or in Gem Haven.

With their dad in prison and the lack of communication, all they could do was follow the order in the letter, which continued to show everyone, especially Zane and Kingsley, that Ridge Stafford still ruled over Gem Haven from behind bars.

"Big John and Smoker left an hour ago to meet two riders from WAKOM Motorcycle Club. They're going to find out what's going on over in Washington. They met with Killere MC last week, so any news will be fresh. That should give us an idea if trouble will head our way." Zane leaned back in the chair. "I need to talk to Dad, but I can't get away for visitation anytime soon."

"I'll go."

Zane frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. I want to make sure he gets through to Burt Shay that Kenna and River need to see their dad." He shrugged. "Doubt it will help, but he needs to see you and I are on the same side, and he's going to need to turn us both down."

"Meanwhile, we're still running around, working our asses off for him." Zane pushed out of the chair.

He understood his brother's frustrations. As the oldest son, Zane was responsible for Gem Haven in their dad's absence. As the second son, Kingsley was taught to do whatever needed to be done to ensure Gem Haven stayed safe for the club and its members. He and his brother were a united front to everyone.

They loved Gem Haven as much as their dad.

"It's good that you'll visit him. Maybe you can find out why we're wasting manpower watching over some woman who wants to be left alone," said Zane.

"Yeah." He walked to the window and looked down the hill.

He studied the outside of the bar. A group of tourists congregated in front of the entrance. As he watched, they moved to the door and went inside. Their decision to open the bar to the campers had turned profitable over the last several years.

It was an idea they'd come up with to bring more money to the club and one their dad refused to do when he was here, thinking it would bring added danger to Gem Haven. But times were different now. They needed a legal cover to hide other activities that would land them in a cell beside their dad.

Zane walked to the window. "I'll feel better with you going to visit dad. I haven't heard anything so at least his privileges weren't stripped away, forcing him to miss visitation day."

Outside, Kenna walked past the bar, heading up the hill toward the clubhouse. His chest tightened. She wasn't working at the bar today. Usually, she stuck close to River but since filling in at the bar, she hadn't gone with River to work at the campground.

It worried him that she'd leave Gem Haven, and he hated having her out of sight. He had to trust her to stay, for her to learn to trust him again. If that meant giving her freedom around Gem Haven, then that's what he'd do.

"I better get out of here before something else pulls me in." Zane looked out the window. "Everything okay between you and Kenna?"

"She's talking to me again."

"That's good."

Since they got back together, she'd slept in his bed every night. There was no hint that she wanted to leave Gem Haven. But so much remained in the balance over her dad not wanting to see her.

Burt Shay would never understand the amount of pain and heartbreak he'd put on Kenna and River.

He turned from the window. "Did you ever find out the story behind Zora when you were going through Dad's records?"

"Nothing." Zane walked down the hall beside him. "I don't ever remember him bringing up her name before. Though, I do remember him grounding me for riding onto the other side of the mountain when I was around twelve. A few of us kids took off for the day and used the old place for target practice with our twenty-twos. Dad was livid."

"Was Zora living there at the time?"

Zane opened the door and stepped outside. "I have no idea. I thought the place was vacant."

"She's been living there for quite some time to grow all that shit. There're flowers and raised beds all around the cabin, with gravel pathways leading to different trails. It looks like she's self-sufficient. I didn't see any mode of transportation. She's getting her water from a nearby spring," he said.

"I don't understand what the fuck is going on."

Kingsley pulled on his beard. "Nobody could live there year-round without some form of heat. Maybe she only stays there during the summer."

"Nope, Big John had been checking on her. He confessed to bringing her firewood, food, and making sure she had water during the winter. He also takes her flowers into some florist in Couer D'alene who buys them from her."

"Is it Big John's woman?" he asked.

Zane shook his head. "He says she isn't."

Kingsley stopped. Kenna had spotted him and hurried in his direction. "Believe me, I'll ask Dad what's up with her."

He couldn't explain why the woman seemed familiar to him. But it wasn't the mystery of where he'd seen her before that bothered him. There shouldn't be a woman living alone on the mountain. Period. It was dangerous.

Kenna stopped short of touching him, looking between Zane and him. "Am I interrupting?"

"Never." He hooked her behind the neck and brought her to his side. "What's up?"

"The woman that lives at the cabin was at the house." She frowned. "She didn't stay."

"What do you mean she was there?" Kingsley shared a glance with Zane, knowing something was wrong. "Did you see her?"

"She knocked, but by the time I got downstairs, nobody was there. When I opened the door, I caught her hurrying into the trees. I'm sure it was her. I've never seen anyone with hair that specific color or that long." Kenna leaned against him. "She left a basket by the front door."

"Just a basket?" asked Zane.

Kenna shrugged. "There's something in it, but it looks like it's wrapped in material. I didn't look. I thought one of you might want to see what it is right away, so I came looking for you."

Zane motioned for Kingsley to go ahead and check it out. "I need to ride over to the campground. If it's an emergency, call the desk and get ahold of me. I'll be there for about thirty minutes. After that, use my cell."

"You're leaving?"

"No, I'll be at the bar. River's meeting Taylor—a friend, for dinner and to catch up." Zane walked backward toward his Harley. "You might also want to find out why Razz and Guy never spotted Zora leaving the cabin."

He nodded and walked with Kenna down the hill. It seemed like he'd spent a lifetime chasing women. First Kenna and River, and now Zora.

He leaned over and kissed the top of Kenna's head without missing a step. "Good day?"

"Boring."

"You could've come up to the clubhouse and spent time with me."

"You were working."

"When it comes to you, it doesn't matter." He veered onto the well-worn path down the middle of the front lawn.

She looked behind them. "Where's your motorcycle?"

"Up at the clubhouse."

"You're going back?" she asked.

"In a while." He pulled her close. "With you."

She smiled, apparently happy to have him include her. He stepped up on the deck and spotted the weaved basket. Squatting beside the gift, he pulled back the red and black material and grunted in surprise. There were cookies stacked in piles. He picked one up, brought it to his nose, and inhaled deeply. Taken back at the cinnamon aroma, he dropped the cookie in the basket and stood.

"She made you cookies?" asked Kenna.

"It looks that way." He pulled out his cell phone, tapped the contact number for the cabin at the campground, and asked River to have Zane call him the moment he got there.

Holding the cell in his hand, he walked away from the basket and stared at it as if it were a snake that would strike at any moment.

"What's wrong?" Kenna approached him and put her hands on his stomach. "It's just a

gift, right?"

"Maybe." He frowned at the basket. "Maybe not."

"You're freaking me out." She stepped into his line of vision. "Are you upset she made cookies for you?"

His pulse echoed in his ears. He swallowed hard. "I'm not a big believer of coincidences."

"Explain."

He shook his head, trying to dispel the thought, but it wouldn't go away. "I don't remember my mom. The only thing I do remember were the cookies she'd make. They were my favorites. Snickerdoodles."

Kenna looked behind her at the basket and then at him. "Is that the same kind?"

"Yeah." But that wasn't all.

Ever since he'd talked to her at the cabin and informed her that Gem Haven Motorcycle Club would be running security on her and the cabin, he couldn't stop thinking that he knew her. She was familiar to him, but he hadn't seen her around Gem Haven before.

Now, she sent cookies to him. His favorite cookies he hadn't had since he was four years old.

"What are you thinking?" whispered Kenna.

He wrapped his arms around her and set her chin on the top of her head. "I need to

find out Zora's relationship with my dad."

"Maybe she's an old girlfriend," suggested Kenna.

"Or, my mother," muttered Kingsley.

Kenna gasped and leaned back to see his face. He met her eyes and shrugged. "At this point, nothing would surprise me."

He'd grown up, believing his mother had run away from Gem Haven. She couldn't stand having her husband's attention on the bikers and not on her. According to his dad, his mom wasn't fit to raise two hellions and had run off when he was four and Zane was five years old.

Nothing more was said, and he and Zane never asked. Ridge Stafford had stepped up and become a single father, surrounding them with a new family. The members of the MC helped him raise his sons.

Kenna

Kenna sat across from River and Taylor, half listening to their conversation. She hadn't met her sister's friend before, but it appeared she had worked at the bar once.

She glanced at the back booth, more interested in Kingsley and Zane's conversation. If she judged their matching expressions, neither man was happy.

She wanted to go to Kingsley and hold his hand or touch him or something. He'd never talked about his mom before, and mentioning her earlier had upset him. If he believed Zora could be his mom, his thoughts and feelings were probably at war.

"I'm so full." Taylor sat back in the chair. "I forgot how big Lori made the burgers."

"You need to come by more often." River nudged her friend's arm. "Or, come back to work at the bar."

"Tempting," mumbled Taylor.

"Are you serious?" River shifted in her seat. "They need another waitress. They hired Kenna but are still short."

"Let me think about it and I'll call you this weekend." Taylor pressed a hand to her stomach. "I'm not sure how that would work with me living above the pizzeria in town. It's a longer drive than I'd want."

"Think about it and let me know. In the meantime, I'll ask Zane if there are any cabins available." River crumbled her napkin and set it on her plate. "No promises, but I'd love to have you back here."

Taylor looked at Kenna. "Do you think there's room for me here?"

"Sure." Kenna wiped the condensation off the outside of her water glass. "We need at least one more person to wait tables."

"Okay, that's settled. If there's a way I can live in Gem Haven, I'll come back. But make sure Zane needs another employee. I don't want him to hire me out of pity." Taylor pouted. "Living in town wasn't exciting as I thought it would be. I'm lonely there. At least here, there are the bikers. After dealing with the city guys, I'd welcome any biker into my life."

River spoke with her friend while Kenna went back to watching Kingsley. The two plates in front of the men remained untouched. Even the mug of beer beside Kingsley was ignored.

"It was nice to meet you." Kenna stood from the table, unable to stay away from Kingsley any longer. "I hope everything works out and I get to work with you."

"Nice to meet you, too." Taylor smiled. "Now that you both gave me something to think about, I'm going to go. I'll call you in the morning, okay?"

"Sure. Sounds good." River stood and hugged her friend.

Kenna made her escape and approached the booth. Kingsley scooted over, making room for her. She leaned against his side, trying to read the mood at the table but both of them had stopped talking at her arrival.

Kingsley put his arm around Kenna, drawing her closer. River soon joined them and glanced at Kenna, reading the tension in the air. She hadn't had a chance to talk to her sister alone about the basket of cookies or what worried Kingsley before Taylor showed up.

As the men began to eat, Kenna exchanged a worried glance with River. It was clear something significant weighed on both their minds.

Finally, Zane broke the silence. "I'll ride out in the morning to visit Zora," he announced.

"Zora?" River frowned. "Who's that?"

"A woman who lives on the other side of the mountain." Zane paused. "Kingsley and Kenna visited her last week. Today, he received a basket of cookies from her before she ran off."

"Oh—that was nice." River frowned. "Why is everyone looking upset?"

"Kingsley thinks it could be our mom, considering she brought the same kind of cookies he remembers eating as a kid," muttered Zane.

River's brows rose. "I thought she ran away when you were little."

"She did." Zane exhaled loudly, ending the conversation.

Kingsley, who'd pushed his food around on his plate, looked up. "I think we should both be there when we talk to her again."

She put her hand on Kingsley's thigh, trying to ease his tension. Once they finished their food, they left the bar and walked toward the house. She linked her fingers in

Kingsley's hand. On top of everything happening, she had to work tomorrow.

"Don't forget you must go to the prison on Sunday for visitation day," said Zane.

Kenna tugged Kingsley's hand. "Can I go with you?"

"Hell, no." Kingsley held her hand, putting it to his chest. "The prison isn't going to let you stroll in there and ask to see your dad. It doesn't work like that."

"I know that." She lifted her chin. "But if your dad can participate in visiting day and I can pass security clearance to see him, I can go, too."

"Someone's been doing their research," he muttered.

Every spare moment she had, she studied the rules of how the prison was run and what kind of privileges prisoners had. Of course, none of them pertained to her dad. Death row was not a short-term sentence. It was a waiting area until they killed him. In her opinion, the prison already treated him as if he was dead.

"Maybe your dad can get a message to my dad for me." She squeezed his hand. "Please."

Kingsley looked at Zane, his expression conflicted before he met her gaze. "Nobody goes up against Ridge Stafford and gets their way."

"I want to try," she said.

He looked at her for a long moment. Afraid he'd tell her no, she whispered, "You promised never to hide anything from me again. Please, don't stop me from trying to get a message to my dad."

He cupped her head and kissed her softly. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

She jumped in excitement, hugged him, hugged River, and could barely contain the adrenaline surging through her. She was one step closer to seeing her dad.

Kingsley

Zane rode the dirt bike on the trail. Kingsley spotted a hill to the right and throttled the bike, shooting forward and taking the jump. He landed on his back wheel ahead of his brother. Back and forth, they raced over the terrain as they had since they were eight years old and got their first motorcycles.

He pulled to a stop above the cabin and pointed the place out to Zane. There was no reason to hike down. Zora knew there was always someone around since putting her under guard.

Zane led the way. He slowed, lowering himself onto the seat, and let the downward roll take him to the edge of the clearing. There was no picture of their mom in the house. He couldn't remember what she looked like. Until yesterday, he'd forgotten about the cookies. The smell had taken him back to a time that escaped him.

Unfortunately, even Zane couldn't remember what she looked like beyond a slim woman with long hair. Though, he could remember screaming and fighting before she left.

Like Zane, most of his memories centered around Elaine, who'd taken care of them until they reached fifth grade, and then Trixie, who made sure they completed their homework and had something to eat if their dad was busy with club business. Both women belonged to members and were still in their lives.

He shut off the dirt bike and toed the kickstand. "Let's get this over with."

Halfway to the cabin, the door opened, and Zora stepped outside. She looked the same as the other day.

"Jesus," muttered Zane.

Kingsley glanced at his brother and instantly knew his suspicions were right. Zora was their mother.

Zora looked from him to Zane. Her face softened, but she worked her hands in worry.

"Explain what you're doing here?" Zane took out a cigarette and lit one—a sign he wasn't as in control as he wanted everyone to believe.

Kingsley stayed where he was, unsure what was going on. It wasn't the first time their dad dropped information in their hands and let them figure it out themselves.

"You do know who I am, don't you, Zane?" Zora's voice trembled. "When Kingsley didn't recognize me, I wasn't sure if either of you would remember me. It's been so long. You were both so young."

"You left," said Zane.

"I've been here..." Zora reached out and ran her hand along a flower bloom in the raised bed. "Twenty-five years."

Kingsley couldn't stop looking at her. His mother. A woman who'd left Gem Haven when he was four years old.

Never once had his dad mentioned she lived on the other side of the mountain.

Whenever he or Zane asked where their mother went, his dad got angry. It was easier to accept she wasn't coming back than it was to get answers out of their dad.

Zane stubbed out his cigarette on the thigh of his jeans and pocketed the butt. "I take it Dad knew you were here the whole time."

Kingsley inhaled swiftly. Of course, their dad knew. He was the one who put her in the cabin and gave her everything she needed to survive. She'd obviously made this place into a home. A home only half an hour from where her sons were raised and lived.

Zora stepped forward. "Ridge is the reason I'm here."

Zane held up his hand, stopping her from getting any closer. "Is there danger or not surrounding you?"

Zora frowned, swinging her hair over her shoulder. "I don't know what you mean. I've told Kingsley there is no reason to protect me or the cabin. I've only had a few people approach my home over the years and they were only curious. Hunters, I believe."

"Why the fuck would you stay here?" he blurted. "You left and never came back."

Zora flinched and wrapped her arms around her middle, cupping her elbows. "There's a lot you don't know."

"Fucking right," muttered Zane.

"I won't cause trouble for you. You don't even have to come here." Zora turned and hurried into the cabin, shutting the door behind her.

Kingsley stepped away, putting the cabin at his back. He wasn't sure how to feel. Once he had left his teen years, he never missed having his mom in his life, so having her near was more of a shock than anything.

"Let's get out of here." Zane strode toward the dirt bikes.

Kingsley looked over his shoulder at the cabin, but the door remained closed. There was still no recognition, only a weird sense that he'd seen her before. Now he knew why.

Kenna

Kenna lined up behind Kingsley. There were ten people, including two kids that looked as if they were around ten years old waiting to go into the visitor room at the prison.

Goosebumps broke out along her arms. She wished they'd let her keep the coat she'd worn on the trip to the prison. She hadn't expected it to be so cold and stark inside the building. If the normal prison holding cells were this depressing, she couldn't imagine what kind of life her dad had on death row.

Kingsley whispered, "They're opening the door. Just stay with me. Don't look at anyone but me, okay?"

It was hard not to gawk. She'd never been around hardened criminals before. When living in the group home, they were threatened with juvie every day. She had spent time in a detention center when a home wasn't available for her. But that place was nothing like an adult prison owned by the state.

She walked through the door. The odor hit her first. It smelled like unwashed bodies, mildew and...and Top Ramen. She swallowed hard but that only made her stomach turn.

Glued to Kingsley's side, she stared at the white and gray blocked linoleum. When he stopped, she lifted her gaze to him. He pulled out a chair. She sat down, afraid to look

across the table. Afraid of seeing what prison does to a man.

She had no clue what Ridge Stafford looked like. All she could go by was the importance Kingsley put on his dad. He ran Gem Haven for his dad. He'd kept a secret from her for years for his dad.

That level of importance in his life meant she hated Ridge Stafford without even meeting him. But if he was the link to seeing her dad, she'd do whatever she needed to do to gain access to him.

"What the fuck are you thinking?" muttered a man.

She lifted her gaze. A big man with a shaved head and a bushy, long gray beard almost completely white aimed his dark eyes at her. Struck with fear, she froze.

She couldn't breathe or move. She also couldn't look away.

"This is Kenna, my ol' lady." Kingsley sat beside her and across from his dad.

"What did you bring her here for?" Mr. Stafford fisted his hands.

He wasn't handcuffed. She swallowed hard. There was nothing to stop him from tossing the table out of his way to put his hands around her throat.

Kingsley had prepared her for the visit. There were others in the room. Nobody was handcuffed. There were several guards walking through the room, keeping an eye on everyone.

"Give her the respect she deserves or I walk." Kingsley never let go of her hand. "She wanted to come here and see you. I think you owe her that after the shit she's lived through."

"I'm not responsible for—"

"No, I was. Thanks to you," said Kingsley.

She stared at Kingsley, never expecting him to stand up for her. But her respect for him rose as he defended his reasons for bringing her here. He'd always supported her when they were alone. She'd never seen him support her out in the open, in front of anyone, because he was always her secret. Her foster parents weren't allowed to know about him. The state would've had him arrested. She never expected him to stand up to his father—not for her. But the fact that he had filled her with courage.

She moistened her lips, wishing she had a sip of water to wet her mouth. "I came to ask you if you'd tell my dad—"

"I never see your dad," said Ridge.

Kingsley had told her that his father would tell her that. He also believed his dad would refuse to pass on any message. She was prepared for him not to help her.

She squeezed Kingsley's hand, knowing that she was foolish for trying. But she'd spent her whole life trying to put her family back together and she wasn't going to stop.

"It's okay if you never see my dad." She cleared her throat, barely able to speak over a whisper. "Even if you never have a chance to tell him anything again, I want you to look in my eyes, take in my face, and know that I never once believed he was dead. Let him know—"

"Stop." Ridge Stafford leaned forward and steepled his hands.

Tears welled in her eyes, blurring her vision. She clenched her teeth, refusing to let

them fall. The man in front of her was responsible for putting Kingsley in her life, and that's something she wouldn't forget—even if it were for selfish reasons.

She hadn't rehearsed what she would say—and maybe she should have. But she wanted to show Mr. Stafford that there were real people involved. Her dad had a daughter, and if there was a chance in hell that they spoke again, she wanted her dad to know that she always believed he was alive.

That personal fact would mean nothing to anyone else. Not even her dad. But it meant everything to her.

It was Kingsley's turn to squeeze her hand. "I'll trade you favors."

His dad leaned back in the chair, narrowing his eyes. "There's nothing I want."

Her chance at getting any message to her father was over. She'd done all she could do. Now she and River would wait and hope that someday, her dad would give her and River permission to see him before the state killed him.

"I think there is." Kingsley let go of her hand and braced his elbows on the table. "How much do you want Zora protected?"

His dad's chin lifted. "I gave you an order. I expect you to follow through."

"Give a little." Kingsley lowered his voice. "Get Kenna's dad to okay a visit with his daughters, and Zane and I will continue to protect Zora."

"You're digging a hole, son," muttered Ridge Stafford.

Kenna barely breathed. The tension at the table scared her. She'd never seen Kingsley go up against someone like his father.

"You're the one who pushed us into that hole." Kingsley paused. "Was it your idea or Zora's to strip us of a mother?"

His dad never moved. He never breathed. He never blinked.

Caught up in the drama playing out in front of her, Kenna no longer concerned herself with the others in the room. Kingsley never talked about his mom or if he'd struggled growing up with only a father raising him. She was interested in learning more about him.

"Did she tell you?" asked Ridge Stafford.

He shook his head. "We figured it out."

Ridge grunted. "I thought you were too young."

"Well, we weren't."

Kingsley's dad sighed heavily. "I'm not dealing with this while I'm locked up."

"Then, get a message to Burt Shay," said Kingsley.

His dad never changed his expression over the use of her father's real name. She had to wonder how well the two men knew each other.

"I'll do what I can."

The breakfast she'd eaten earlier sat heavily in her stomach. Kingsley said no more. After ten minutes, people around them started moving. She stood and met Ridge Stafford's gaze.

The older man lifted his brow. She almost would've taken that small movement for respect, but she had no time to analyze what had passed between them because Kingsley led her to the door.

It seemed to take forever to gather their personal belongings from the guard and walk out of the gate into the parking lot. By that time, she had a burst of energy.

"Do you think he'll try to contact my dad?" she asked.

"I think Ridge Stafford will do what he wants to do." He looped his arm around her shoulders. "I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"He said he'd try."

Kingsley grunted, exactly like his dad had grunted inside the prison when he refused to answer. At the Harley, she threw her arms around him.

"I'm sorry you never got any answers about your mom." She kissed his lips. "Are you upset?"

"Not really looking for answers." He inhaled deeply, keeping her close. "Just trying to protect Gem Haven and you."

Kenna

A group of bikers walked into the bar. Kenna grabbed a notepad and followed them to the tables. It was still early in the afternoon. They'd want to eat and get out before those from the campground wandered over for dinner.

"Does anyone need drinks?" She held up her pen.

Snake, nearest to her, pointed around the table at each man. "Beer, whiskey, beer, beer, and a whiskey and Coke."

"Got it." She tore off the piece of paper. "Rebecca will be by in a minute to take your orders."

She walked away, motioning at Rebecca to let her know the table was ready. While filling up the beers at the counter, she spotted River walking in alone. Kenna frowned, noticing the backpack on her sister. She'd gone without her pack lately. Knowing the bag was more of a security blanket to her sister than a handy way of carrying stuff around, she became concerned. Something must've happened.

Putting all the drinks on two trays, she carried the order to the table, passing them out to the men. She wasn't needed until they finished eating, and then she'd clean off the table and prep it for the next customers that came in.

She and Rebecca had fallen into a routine that kept them constantly moving, making

the hours go by faster. The customers appeared happy with how efficiently she and Rebecca worked to serve their food and drinks.

After serving the drinks and checking with the other customers, she headed straight to River. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you think something is wrong?" River ripped a napkin into shreds, making a pile on the counter of the bar.

She might have been separated from her sister growing up, but she'd learned that River was quick to think the worst when something happened. Most of the time, River's stress came from Zane. Ironically, Zane was also the one person who could make River feel safe again.

"Where's Zane?" she asked.

"With Kingsley," muttered River.

"Aw." She nodded in understanding.

As she left for work, she learned Kingsley and Zane had plans to ride. Since it was River's day off, she was stuck home alone. She thought her sister was okay being by herself until they got back.

"You do know it's club business." She softened her voice. "He'll come back."

"What if he doesn't?"

"But, he will." She leaned closer. "They both will."

She understood her sister's worries. The fear of losing contact with Kingsley gave her

nightmares. He was the one constant in her life. He'd always come after her no matter how hard she fought or how far she ran. That reassurance that he would love her no matter how she messed up had done more for her than anything in her life.

"Do you know where they went?" whispered River.

"I think Kingsley mentioned St. Maries." She shrugged. "I could be wrong. It also wouldn't surprise me if the ride has something to do with their dad. Yesterday's visit to the prison was intense."

"But you got him to listen to you." River's voice came out louder. "I'm so proud of you."

"I was too scared not to say something." Kenna held up her finger as a customer walked through the door. "I'll be right back."

She took the man's drink order and returned to the counter to make a bloody Mary. Wanting to pep her sister up, she asked if she wanted a drink.

"You do know I'm not twenty-one yet." River propped her chin in her upturned hand and leaned against the bar. "Two more months."

"Don't tell me you haven't had alcohol." She hurried to deliver the drink and returned to her sister. "And, I haven't forgotten your age. I just figured with the club owning the bar and eating ninety percent of your meals here, you would've had a drink."

She stared down at the counter. "I have plans with Zane to drink on my birthday."

"Well, see." Kenna knocked on the scarred wood in front of her sister. "He wouldn't make plans with you if he was going to ghost you."

River looked up and frowned. "I'm stupid."

"You are not." Kenna walked around the counter and grabbed River's shoulders, shaking her. "I get it, sis. The first thing I do each morning is make sure Kingsley is beside me in bed, and it takes me a minute to calm down because I panic. Maybe it would be different if we weren't split apart or we didn't live in foster homes. I don't know. But I understand how badly you need Zane by your side because that's how I feel about Kingsley."

River grabbed her, hugging her tightly. Kenna wrapped her arms around her and the backpack. Her sister started laughing. Kenna slapped her pack, knowing how ridiculous they looked—but she didn't care.

She'd missed too many years of having someone beside her who understood her feelings. No one else would comprehend the fucked-up mess they'd survived.

"Do you think mom knew that her life was in danger and that she'd end up dead?" River pulled away from her. "I keep thinking about her. There's so little information online. There's only that one article about dad's crimes and they hadn't even mentioned mom by name."

"I imagine she had no idea she was going to be killed."

"I hope so." River inhaled deeply. "I hope—I don't know. I hope she didn't suffer."

"She was a good mom," whispered Kenna. "She loved us. She loved Dad."

River looked around the bar and then met Kenna's gaze. "I know you think dad is innocent, but—"

"I never said he was innocent. I said he was alive." Kenna turned her back to the

room. "I'm angry, too. He lied to us. He made Kingsley and Zane lie to us." She inhaled swiftly. "It's like we're caught in a web of secrets, and we don't have anything to free us."

"Is someone going to help me?"

Kenna turned around, plastered a smile on her face to greet the customer, and gasped when she found Zora inside the bar. The shock of seeing Kingsley's mom sent her heart racing.

"C-can I help you?" she asked.

"Where is he?" Zora's face pinched. "He's supposed to be here."

Kenna glanced at River, who shrugged. "Who?"

"You know damn well who." Zora walked over to the nearest table and shoved the chair, making it topple. "Bitches."

Kenna stepped over to River and whispered, "What's wrong with her?"

"She's mad."

It was more than that. She'd seen the woman at the cabin—calm, quiet, and sensible.

Zora turned and screamed, "Don't just stand there. Get him."

"I don't know who—"

Lori hurried into the room, carrying a dishtowel. The cook looked straight at Kenna while going to Zora. "Call the clubhouse. Get Big John."

She hesitated. This was Kingsley's mother.

"Now." Lori reached for Zora, but the woman backed away.

"Don't touch me." Zora swatted Lori's hands

The cook kept walking, pushing Zora toward the kitchen. Heart pounding, Kenna took her cell phone out of her pocket, pulled up the contact for the clubhouse, and connected the call.

"Yo."

"This is Kenna." She thrust her hand in her hair, unsure if the member knew who she was. "Kingsley's Kenna."

"Got it."

"Lori needs Big John at the bar," she said.

"He just rode out."

"Shit." She looked at the two women, arguing and drawing attention from the customers. "If you hear from him, tell him we need him at the bar."

"Will do."

She disconnected the call and instantly called Kingsley. Glancing at River while the call connected, she found her sister also holding her phone to her ear.

"Zane," mouthed River.

She nodded. It wouldn't matter which brother came. Lori needed help with Zora.

Her call went to voicemail. "It's me. Zora is at the bar." She paused. "She's upset. Can you come?"

As soon as she put the phone away, she overheard River talking to Zane. She pointed toward the kitchen, left her sister there to explain what was going on, and went to check on Lori.

Rebecca intercepted her before she reached the swinging door. "Who was that woman?"

"I don't know," she lied.

"Coo-coo." Rebecca raised her brows. "I'll take care of the customers. Go check on Lori. She looks like she could use all the help she can get."

She slipped into the kitchen and stayed back at the commotion going on near the back counter.

Zora struck out, knocking a pan off the hanger. Lori held her hands out to the sides, not letting the other woman get past her to go back into the bar. Afraid the older woman would get hurt, Kenna slowly inched forward. If nothing else, she could grab Lori and get her to safety before she got hurt.

"Let's stop and take a deep breath." Lori inhaled deeply. "Big John will be here soon."

"I don't want him. I want Ridge. I know you're keeping him from me, and I want him back." Zora's hair had come undone and wrapped around her shoulders. "Let me see him."

Lori caught sight of Kenna. "Did you call?"

She nodded. "Big John's not at the clubhouse."

"Damnit." Lori backed up a step. "Okay. Let me think."

Zora turned to Kenna. "You—you were with Kingsley."

Kingsley's mom launched herself at her, grabbing Kenna's arms before she could step away. "Where's my baby?"

"I-I don't know." She flinched at the nails digging into her skin. "I called him."

"No, no, no. What have you done?" Zora flung herself around, pacing the kitchen. "He's going to be mad. He's going to make me leave. I can't go. I need to get out of here. I need to hide. I can't let him see me."

Zora kept ranting irrationally, and her movements grew agitated. Keena could no longer understand the words coming from Kingsley's mom. The way she acted scared her. Something wasn't right.

Lori grabbed her arm. "Call Kingsley."

"I tried," she whispered. "He's not answering."

"I don't know what to do." Lori blew her cheeks out. "Big John is usually here when she escapes the cabin."

Escapes? Kenna swallowed the apprehensive coursing through her. Kingsley was guarding the woman. She wasn't a prisoner there.

The back door burst open, and Kingsley filled the kitchen. Kenna held herself back from rushing to him. The tension in the room suffocated her.

Kingsley's gaze swept past his mom to Kenna, checking her out from head to toe. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. It wasn't her. It was his mom. Something was wrong.

Lori wrung her hands. "Your dad didn't—"

"I know what he did." He looked at Zora. "Will you come with me?"

Zora, much calmer after seeing her son, walked to him. He led her outside and let the door shut behind him. Kenna looked toward Lori, wanting answers but not sure she had any right to ask the questions that plagued her.

Lori's shoulders slumped. "I never thought it would come to this," she muttered, almost to herself. "He promised she'd be okay."

Kenna took a tentative step closer. "Lori, what exactly is going on? Why would you say Big John usually deals with Zora when she escapes from the cabin?"

Lori's eyes were haunted as she met Kenna's gaze. "Zora...she's not just any woman. She belongs to Ridge—"

"I know she's Kingsley and Zane's mom," she said.

Lori nodded. "Big John, he's tried to shield her for years."

Kenna's mind raced. Unaware of the dynamics within Gem Haven Motorcycle Club, she could only wait for Kingsley to return.

Kingsley

Zane and Kingsley walked into the house with Big John. Kenna got up from the couch and headed out of the room, but Kingsley caught her wrist before she could leave with River.

"Don't go," he whispered.

She moved closer. "Are you sure?"

He'd spent the last two hours in the cabin with his mother, trying to calm her down. Finally, she'd fallen asleep after screaming at him to get Ridge and bring him to her. Nothing he said had convinced her that Ridge was in prison. In her mind, Ridge was running Gem Haven Motorcycle Club, and Zora believed he was out fooling around with other women.

While trying to convince him to get Ridge, she kept confusing him for Zane. She even called him Ridge a couple of times. It was clear that something wasn't right. Gone was the sensible woman he'd met at the cabin.

He hadn't even had time to wrap his head around the idea that Zora was his mom, and then all hell broke loose.

He pulled Kenna in front of him and draped his arms around her. She grounded him.

He needed to bury his past to move on with his future.

Big John rubbed his hand over his face and shook his head. "I always told Ridge it wasn't right to keep the truth from both of you."

"Was she living in the cabin the whole time?" Zane leaned against the back of the couch and crossed his arms.

Big John shook his head. "I promised Ridge I'd—"

"Your loyalty is to the acting president of Gem Haven." Kingsley lifted his chin toward Zane. "Our dad isn't capable of running the MC at the moment."

Big John inhaled deeply, his barrel chest growing bigger with each second they were made to wait. "I swear on the patch, I'm loyal to Gem Haven."

"Then start talking," said Zane.

"Ridge sent Zora away years ago when both of you were young." Big John's gaze locked on Zane. "To a home where they help those who are..." Big John tapped his temple. "Unstable, I guess you'd call it."

Kingsley started to get the picture. "If what happened today is an example of her being unstable, why would my dad let her live alone?"

"Because when she's on her medication, she does okay. She wants to live in the cabin. The solitude and peacefulness makes her happy. She enjoys growing her flowers. Usually, she even understands the importance of taking her medicine." Big John rubbed his neck. "Ridge has it set up that I take her flowers to town once a week in the summertime, and she gets money from the sales. He has an account for her, and from there, I deliver food and supplies to her once a month." He wiped the sweat off

his forehead. "I also make sure I mail the letters she writes to Ridge and vice-versa, he sends me letters that I can give to her."

Zane grunted. "Apparently, she's not taking her medication."

"There are times—every few years, that something triggers Zora, and she believes her mind is clearer without the medication." Big John inhaled heavily.

"Like seeing her sons," mumbled Kingsley. "Damn."

"When she goes off the medicine, she comes and causes a scene, looking for Ridge. Normally, he'd be here to take her back and stay with her while she gets regulated. Since he's been in prison, she's only come up one other time, and Lori was able to stop her from causing a scene before I took her back to the cabin." Big John looked at Kingsley. "I never meant to hurt you or Kingsley. Ridge...he wanted to protect Gem Haven."

"We'll take that up with our dad." Kingsley dipped his chin. "For now, carry on with taking care of Zora. She's comfortable with you. Make sure she has what she needs."

"I've got her back on the medicine and will go over there to make sure she continues taking it until I know she can take care of herself. Normally, it only takes a few days." Big John paused. "I'll also let Ridge know what happened here."

"Thanks." Zane nodded, following him into the foyer and closing the door behind the vice president.

"Jesus," muttered Kingsley, holding Kenna tighter.

Kenna turned in his arms and pressed her cheek against his chest. He palmed her head, holding her to him. There was no way to prepare himself for hearing his mom

had a mental illness. He'd spent his whole life imagining her like one of the bitches that partied at the clubhouse—a carefree wanderer looking for something out of reach.

Unable to take care of her mental health and be a mother, Zora lived in a hunter's cabin by herself, dependent on his dad and now Big John.

Zane returned to the room. "She needs to go somewhere they can watch over her."

"Hang on." Kingsley frowned. "We don't know what's fully wrong with her. Until we know more, hauling her away could trigger her into another fucking freak out and have her believing Dad is still at the clubhouse. Lori mentioned Zora fears Dad is hiding from her. In her mind, he is."

"It's heartbreaking," whispered Kenna. "I can't imagine fearing you were lost to me."

Kingsley kissed the top of her head. "Ain't happening, brat."

River moved to Zane's side. "I could be wrong, but Zora appears bipolar. I was in a foster home once where the foster mother was bipolar. The dad gave all the kids a talk to educate us in case we noticed anything strange going on with her. We were supposed to tell him of any signs she'd gone off her medication. If that's what's wrong with Zora, then Big John is right. In a few days, she'll be herself, and maybe then you can talk to her and find out what's going on."

Zane nodded. "We'll wait then."

Despite Zora being their mother, there was a reason behind their dad's treatment of her. Either it verged on abuse or was in Zora's best interest. He wasn't going to jump to conclusions. Ridge Stafford never made any rash decisions without a plan. For some reason, he approved of Zora living in the cabin away from her family.

Zane and River left the room. He kissed Kenna, needing to calm down. When he got the phone call, he'd returned to Gem Haven as fast as he could ride. Luckily, he was close and got back before anyone got hurt.

She planted her hands on his chest. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything." He smoothed the hair back from her face and exhaled heavily. "It'll all work out."

"I'm sure it will." She softened her voice. "But I know what it feels like to find out someone has lied to you your whole life and what you believed wasn't the truth."

There was no attitude coming from her. But he felt gut-punched all the same. He was the one who'd lied to her and had her believing her father was dead when he was very much alive.

He brought her to his chest, holding her close. They were two fucked up people, trying to love each other in a world that constantly changed.

Kenna

Kingsley's hand rubbed her stomach as he lazily let her nipple pop out of his mouth. She sighed, having orgasmed moments ago. It was so tempting to stay in bed all day and ignore the fact that she had to go to the bar that afternoon to work, and Kingsley was due at the clubhouse for a meeting.

She turned to face him. "Stay with me for a bit longer. Forget about the motorcycle club. We can hide in the room until I go to work."

He chuckled, but his eyes were serious. "You know I can't do that. Gem Haven doesn't run itself."

She pouted. He kissed her forehead before getting out of bed.

She sighed, sitting up to watch him gather his clothes. Knowing she wouldn't change his mind, she reluctantly slid off the bed and walked into the bathroom. The warm shower cleared her mind and put energy back into her body. Hopefully, work would go by fast, and she could come back to the house and enjoy her time with Kingsley.

After wrapping a towel around her hair, she grabbed another to wrap around her body. Going into the bedroom, she found Kingsley on the phone. She quickly picked out her clothes, slipped into a pair of panties, and put on a bra.

"Thanks for letting me know." His tone was all business.

She frowned, but he winked, reassuring her that everything was okay.

"I'll be up there in a few minutes. Thanks, Big John." Kingsley disconnected the call.

"Everything okay?" She pulled on a pair of shorts and snapped the waist closed.

"Big John checked in on Zora earlier, and the medicine seems to have worked. She's more herself and wants to apologize for the trouble she caused at the bar." Kingsley ran his hands down his face.

"It's sad that she feels like she's done something wrong when how she feels is out of her control." Kenna put on her shirt. "I hope you understand that how she acted wasn't coming from her but her mental illness."

"I get it, even if I don't understand it." Kingsley tied his boots. "I'm not going over to see Zora today. Too much stuff to get done with the club. I'll check in with Zane and see if he wants to go over there tomorrow."

She nodded. They'd talked a little about what they could do to help Zora, but Kingsley was hesitant to change anything until he talked to his dad to find out why he had Zora hidden away in the hunter's cabin.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Kenna startled, looking at Kingsley. He got up from the edge of the bed to open the bedroom door.

As soon as he turned the handle, River burst inside, looking wildly around the room. Once she connected with Kenna, she hurried to her sister's side.

"The prison called. Zane's talking to them now," she said breathlessly. "Come

downstairs. He mentioned Dad's name."

"Seriously?" Kenna's heart skipped a beat. "Do you think this is it?"

"I don't know. Come on."

She grabbed River's hand, and together, they rushed downstairs. Excitement and anticipation filled her. Maybe her dad had changed his mind and decided to let them see him.

As they reached the bottom, Kenna could see the tension on Zane's face as he held the phone tightly against his ear. The room's heavy silence amplified the importance of the moment. She hadn't seen her dad for over nine years, believing he was dead until only recently.

Kingsley joined them, his gaze fixed on his brother, awaiting the news with them. The sudden possibility of seeing her dad stirred a mixture of hope, fear, and confusion within her. She squeezed River's hand, finding comfort in having her sister by her side as they moved forward with their lives.

River whispered, "Can we—?"

Zane held up his hand, stopping her from asking. Kenna inhaled deeply, understanding her sister's impatience. The moment she received validation that her father was alive, she'd wanted to see him.

"Thanks." Zane disconnected the call and met Kingsley's gaze before directing his attention to River and Kenna. "He's given his approval for your visit, but—"

"We can go." She grabbed River, swaying back and forth.

The relief was so deep she could barely stand. Finally, she was going to see her dad. All the questions about their mom's death that had gone unanswered will finally come out, and she can learn why he faked his own death. She was going to spend every moment that she could with him.

"But!" Zane broke through their celebration. "You must request a visitation and wait until the on-call judge grants you permission. It's not a done deal until you get the judge's signature on your form."

"We'll do it." She squeezed her sister. "I just know it'll work out. It has to."

"We'll do it first thing on Monday." River moved over to Zane and hugged him. "Thank you."

"It wasn't me." Zane's mouth tightened underneath his beard.

Kingsley palmed the back of Kenna's neck. "Dad must've got word to him, gave him my number, and that's why the prison called me regarding a visit for both of you."

"I don't care who did it. I'm grateful that we're finally going to see him." She pressed her hand to her chest. "God, I can't believe this. I was too scared to hope."

"Just remember, it's not a done deal," reminded Kingsley.

"I know." But there was no way she would believe the visit wouldn't go through. She had to think positive.

"I need to get up to the clubhouse." Zane guided River away from them. "Do you still plan on going to the campground and filling in for Phil?"

"Yeah." River opened the door. "I'll walk out with you."

River caught Kenna's gaze and held up crossed fingers. She, in return, held up her fingers. This was their first positive sign that it would be possible to see their dad again.

"Are you going to the bar now or waiting until three?" asked Kingsley.

"I'll wait." She grabbed the edges of his vest. "What do you think the chances are of the judge letting us see him?"

"Let's not do this." He kissed her swiftly. "One day at a time. If you start worrying now, you'll drive yourself crazy."

"Some would say it was too late. I'm already crazy." She kissed him back. "Crazy for you."

"Better be, brat." He smacked her ass. "I'll see you later."

The towel wrapped around her wet hair unraveled. She caught the material, refastening it at the base of her neck.

Kinsley growled, eyeing her. She warmed, knowing that look. Knowing how he made her feel when he got that expression.

She stepped toward him. He grabbed her hips, keeping her away.

"I need to go." He kissed her quickly. "I'll swing by the bar after the meeting."

"Hurry," she whispered.

His gaze darkened as he backed away from her.

"I love you," she mouthed.

He stopped. His chin hit his chest, and he placed his hand over his heart. Pat. Pat.

She melted.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kenna

Lori stood in the kitchen doorway, frantically motioning her hand. Kenna set down the tray she carried and hurried across the room.

The cook glanced around to make sure no one else was within earshot. "How's Zora doing?"

With Kingsley and Zane only recently learning that Zora was their mother, she had no idea if she was even supposed to talk about the woman. But considering Lori handled Zora when she showed up at the bar, she chose her words carefully.

"She's back at the cabin, and from what I've heard, she's doing well," she said.

A look of relief spread across Lori's face, and her shoulders relaxed. "There was a time when Zora and I were friends. We worked together in the kitchen when we were only teenagers. That was before Ridge took her out of the bar, of course."

Kenna squeezed the woman's arm in understanding. Lori's concern came from the history they shared. Gem Haven had a lot of secrets. It seemed like everyone had a part in the web that was tightly woven around those who lived on the mountain.

Though she had known Kingsley forever, she was an outsider to Gem Haven. Privately, she struggled to live in Kingsley's world where others belonged here more than her.

For her, he was her whole world—her friend, lover, guardian, and protector. But where did she fit in at Gem Haven?

Even River seemed to adapt to life on the mountain faster than her. What would happen once she talked with her dad? She inhaled deeply. Maybe everything would make more sense, and she could finally concentrate on herself.

For now, she dealt with an incurable need to have Kingsley beside her twenty-four/seven. Without him, she felt unneeded, which led to feeling unwanted—thanks to how she grew up.

Everyone had a job and a place where they were valued. Kingsley had the motorcycle club, his brother, and even his dad, considering he had easy access to visitations in prison. Now, he had a mom back in his life. River had Zane, and her sister enjoyed working at the campground.

The buzzer went off in the kitchen. Lori waved her off, smiling thanks, and moved to the oven. Kenna went back into the bar. More people had entered while she'd left the room.

She moved to the nearest table and worked across the room, gathering drink orders and checking in with the customers already served.

Two hours later, the Gem Haven Motorcycle Club members drifted in, asking for drinks and dinner. Kenna's mood lifted, and energy filled her, knowing the meeting was over and that she could look forward to seeing Kinsley.

Grabbing her notepad, she visited the tables and back booth in the order they filled. There were enough drinks to keep her busy. She grabbed four pitchers and set the trays on the counter.

Rebecca hurried behind her, clipping orders on the spin-wheel for the kitchen. "Yell if you need help with the bikers. The campers will start strolling in at six and they'll want to get out of here."

"So far, I'm keeping up." She pulled the tap and filled the pitcher. "I'll check on Lori after I serve the drinks and see if she needs any help before Taylor arrives for work."

"Thanks." Rebecca grabbed a plate of food and hustled out onto the floor.

The hair at the back of her neck tingled. She looked up, scanned the room, and relaxed. Kingsley had arrived.

She smiled, placing the full pitcher of beer on the tray, and grabbed another one, anxious to finish so that she'd have a few minutes to catch up with him.

Picking up the tray, she walked around the counter and made it to the table without slopping the beer over the rims of the pitchers. She hurried back, grabbed four mugs, and returned to the table.

"If you need a refill, just yell." She picked up her tray. "Rebecca will take your orders in a minute."

Razz dipped his chin and the others at the table who she hadn't met yet volunteered their approval by lifting a finger, winking, and making eye contact. She stepped away to get the next order.

"Ten bucks I can tap that ass before I finish my beer," said a man behind her.

A loud crash startled her. She dropped the empty tray.

"Fight. Fight," chanted the men.

As soon as she straightened, Rebecca grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the counter. "Stay back."

She turned around. There were men standing everywhere. Her gaze, drawn to the movement in the middle, she zeroed in on the tattooed arm bulging before it swung out and hit the other man. She gasped, stepping forward, needing to stop Kingsley before he got hurt.

"No way, my friend." Rebecca pulled her back against the counter. "Let him deal with the men."

"Why are they fighting?" She stood on tiptoes, trying to see past the others. "Kingsley just walked in."

"I'm sure he overheard Savage talking about you," said Rebecca.

"Me?" She studied the man on the floor, bleeding from his nose and trying to get up.

She never paid much attention to the men. The bikers talked all the time. She was only doing her job. Kingsley should understand that she would never think of hooking up with one of his MC brothers.

Kingsley lifted Savage off the floor. "Don't ever look." He hit Savage in the jaw. "Talk." He punched him in the gut. "Think about my woman, or I'll kill you."

Savage, bent at the waist, coughed and held up his hand. "Didn't know she belonged—" He coughed. "Sorry, brother."

"Cool it, boys. Simmer down and clean up the mess," shouted Lori from the doorway of the kitchen. "Rebecca, foods up. Kenna, see if Kingsley needs anything. The rest of you, straighten the table and chairs."

She rushed to Kingsley's side, scanning his face and pushing him away from the others. Then, she picked up his hands and looked at his knuckles. They were red but surprisingly unharmed.

There was no reason to fight. He should've ignored Savage.

She pulled him to the counter and pointed at a stool. "Sit."

"Are you ordering me around now?" He grinned.

"Maybe I should." She walked around the counter and filled a shot glass with whiskey. "Drink and chill."

He tipped back the drink and exhaled loudly. "How often do the members talk to you like that?"

She raised her brows. "Talking is free. It doesn't mean I listen to them."

"Bullshit." He leaned forward. "Tomorrow night, we'll go to the clubhouse. I'll claim you in front of every fucker that's there. They know better than to even look at you."

She wasn't the type of person who needed a big show of emotions. Kingsley knew that.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

He slid the shot glass across the counter and nodded for her to fill it up again. "Nothing."

That wasn't true. He was keeping something from her.

Kingsley was the kindest, most even-tempered, and reliable person she knew. Getting in fights and tossing back whiskey wasn't his style.

She studied him. Yet, here he was, doing a good job of losing his cool. Something had happened at the meeting before he got here and went off on the other biker.

"How about I get you something to eat?" She covered his hand and squeezed. "You'll feel better with something in your stomach."

He stood, leaned over the counter, and kissed her hard. "I got shit to do. I'll see you after work."

He walked out of the bar. She looked around to see if anyone else thought he acted strange, but everyone had returned to drinking and eating as if the fight hadn't happened.

Kingsley

Kingsley walked to his motorcycle, needing to ride. After the meeting, frustration filled him. He was tired of changes.

It took one fucking day to put a target on Gem Haven. Somehow, Valdones Motorcycle Club decided to push their luck and sent a message that they were coming after Gem Haven.

It was as if taking out two Valdones when they decided to start fires all around the mountain wasn't enough to scare them away. The club would need to buckle down and keep constant watch.

Then, that fucker Savage had to open his God damn mouth. Kenna shouldn't be working in the bar. She could stay at the house all day if it was up to him. There was no reason for her to earn money.

Zane rode up on his Harley, parked in front of the bar, and cut the engine. "Where are you headed?"

"Riding." He threw his leg over the seat.

"Are you coming back soon?"

"Only because Kenna's here." He held Zane's gaze. "I want one fucking week of

normalcy. Is that too much to ask for?"

Zane scoffed. "You've lived in Gem Haven your whole life. When has it ever been simple?"

His brother was right. If it wasn't the club, it was something else. He thought it would get easier to have Kenna and River here. At least he wasn't riding all over, chasing Kenna.

Life in Gem Haven was far from easy. The constant threats and the never-ending cycle of retaliation weighed heavily on him. He had a future to think about now.

The most precious thing in his life was here with him, and he wanted better for her.

Kingsley revved the engine. The roar of the Harley gave him a brief moment of clarity amidst the chaos. Riding was his only refuge. A place he could escape, even for a short while.

He needed the ride. He needed to feel the wind against his face, the vibration of the bike beneath him. He needed to clear his head.

As he sped away from the bar, he couldn't help but think of Kenna. She anchored him, keeping him from losing his head—most times. Other times, she was the cause of the chaos inside of him.

He'd almost lost it today when he walked into the bar and overheard Savage talking about her. He would never share what belonged to him.

With each passing mile, the tension in his shoulders increased. The reality of Gem Haven's dangerous situation lingered at the back of his mind. Valdones Motorcycle Club's threat was real. They would need to prepare for whatever came next.

He stopped at the turn onto the county road and rode around the steel gate onto the forestry trail. He slowed his speed now that he was off the asphalt. The trail offroad was smoothed from the electric company coming in twice a year to check the wires strung across the land, but he wasn't interested in riding the line on his Harley. He wanted to make it as far as the mountain ridge, and then he'd walk the quarter mile to the hunter's cabin.

He hadn't set out to visit Zora. All he knew was that he needed to talk to her and see that she was okay.

His mother.

She lived close by for most of his life, but he had no contact with her. He wanted answers, and he wasn't going to get them from his dad.

At the end of the trail, he parked his Harley. Looking all around him, he searched for any sign that someone had ridden over the land lately. Big John was the only one who would come this way to check on Zora and bring her supplies. It still ate at him that the V.P. of the club never told him or Zane about Zora.

His dad still had control of those who would do his dirty work.

Sweeping his hair back, he took the skullcap out of his back pocket and slipped it on. He hiked, looking at familiar landmarks. There were signs of someone living on the land. Light trails that were no wider than a deer track between trees.

The crisp air carried the scent of pine and earth. Leaves crunched under his boots with each step, bringing him closer to the cabin and the answers he sought.

He reached the clearing where the hunter's cabin stood. It was a rustic building made of weather-beaten, rough-sawed lumber, blending almost seamlessly into the

surroundings. A hiker or hunter could pass by it at a hundred yards and not see a thing.

Except for the flowers.

His heart pounded. A mix of anticipation and indecision soured his stomach.

Taking a deep breath, he approached the door and knocked softly. The door creaked open, revealing Zora's shadowed face. Her eyes widened in surprise, then softened as she recognized him.

"Do you have a few minutes?" he asked.

The ride had calmed him. He wasn't here to argue or fight. He only wanted answers.

She stepped back. "Come in."

The cabin's interior was much like he remembered when he was younger—simple, yet dried flowers hanging from the ceiling gave it a pleasant aroma.

"I wasn't expecting you." Zora's soft tone stayed neutral, but her eyes searched his face. "Is everyone okay?"

"I need answers." He widened his stance. "I figured you're the only one who will give me the truth."

"Wh-what answers?"

"Why did you leave? And why did Dad keep you here without letting us see you?" he asked.

Zora sighed. The weight of years of secrets was evident in her expression. "It's complicated," she began, but he cut her off.

"No, it's not. You had two young sons who needed a mother, and you left us."

She nodded in resignation. "Sit down. I'll tell you what you want to know."

He settled into the wooden chair opposite her. Whatever she had to say, he was ready to face. The past was no longer behind him. He was staring into his mother's face.

She drew in a deep breath. "Your father is a good man, but he had...the club came first with him, and I'm not blaming him. I knew where he stood when I met him. I was one of the girls who hung around Gem Haven, and I fell madly in love with Ridge. I married him, knowing that he would make something of Gem Haven."

"What does that have to do with you leaving us?"

Her eyes glistened with unspoken pain. "For him to lead the club, he couldn't have any weaknesses."

He looked away from her, knowing his dad. He raised Zane and him never to show emotions and be strong in front of the others. They were groomed to take over the club since they were young. He could guess that his dad viewed Zora's mental health as something his enemies could use against him.

"So, he sent you away," he muttered.

"I was rapid cycling. I needed to go. I believed I could get better and then come back to him, and I did. I came back, but sometimes..." Zora shook her head. "Sometimes, I don't want to feel... less, and I'd stop taking my medicine. During those times, I felt more like myself. But I wasn't a good mother. I was dangerous."

Kingsley blew out his cheeks. It hurt to hear about her struggle. Everyone deserved to feel like life was out there for them to enjoy, and nothing should hold her back.

"I understand when I'm having one of my manic episodes, I cause trouble for those around me—"

"Fuck that." He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. "Who tells you that you have to act a certain way?"

"It's not healthy for me."

"This is Gem Haven. We're all a little fucked up." He shrugged. "I understand how medicine would mask the...the..."

"Highs and lows," she added for him.

He nodded. "But you don't have to hide in the cabin."

"Oh, I'm not hiding." She sat straighter. "I love living here. I grow flowers, and it's peaceful. Besides, Ridge needs to concentrate on running the motorcycle club, and Big John takes good care of me. I have everything I need." She frowned. "But I do worry about your dad."

"You know he's in prison, right?"

She laughed, catching her lower lip between her teeth before she met his gaze. "I'm bipolar, not stupid."

The tear that had clung to her lashes let go. He watched the droplet slide down her cheek. All those years, she'd stayed away from Gem Haven, away from her husband, away from her kids. He struggled to merge the image of the father he adored with the

man who'd let his wife live a lonely life away from everything and everyone.

"You were okay being separated from your kids?" he said.

She inhaled swiftly and pursed her lips. Her chin lifted as if to shield herself from his judgment.

"I lived here because it was best for my kids." She held up her hand. "Don't blame your father. While he had his reasons, I had mine."

"Why?" He pressed his back into the chair. "You missed out on everything."

"It was worth it knowing you grew up with a happy childhood, surrounded by people who supported and loved you." She moved to the side of the room and opened a chest. "When your dad was here, he'd let me in the house after you boys were asleep. I'd sit for hours, watching you and Zane." She held up a blanket and inhaled deeply. "You outgrew this blanket, and I brought it back here so I could have a piece of you with me."

The air left his lungs. "Why didn't you fight harder?"

Fighting was all he'd known growing up under Ridge Stafford. If he wanted anything, he fought for it. Nothing was given to him for free.

She shook her head. "I have my reasons."

"What?" He wasn't going to let her excuse what happened.

She set the blanket back into the chest and closed the lid. "I came to Gem Haven like so many other young women who find themselves partying with the members at the clubhouse. I'd been on my own since I was sixteen."

"Where were your parents?" he asked.

He never had any desire to find his mother's family after he realized that she'd left him. Like his dad, and like Zane, he concentrated on Gem Haven. The members were his family.

"It was only my mom." She worked her hands in agitation. "She committed suicide because of..."

Fuck.

He stood from the chair. His mom had alienated herself into the cabin to keep her sons from hurting the way she had, growing up with a mother who had her own mental health problem.

His mom was afraid that she, too, would not survive and didn't want him and Zane to witness the results of losing the battle. In her own way, his mom wanted to protect her kids from the pain she'd experienced as a child.

He cleared his throat. "I should get home."

His mom nodded, hugging her middle.

Silence hung heavily between them. The thick air now filled with more secrets. He needed to get outside and breathe.

He was at the door in two steps but stopped before walking out.

"You're welcome to come to the house. Anytime. I'll make sure nobody makes you leave until you're ready to go home." He met her gaze. "You're not less . You're enough."

Happiness filled her watery gaze. He dipped his chin and walked out, leaving her alone in the cabin.

He had no idea how many years she'd hidden her struggles or how many sacrifices she'd made. He was starting to understand what kept her away. Zora had nothing to fear anymore.

It wasn't his place to judge her.

Kenna

Kenna thumbed through the sketchbook on the bed. Most of her past was drawn in the book. The day her mom died. The day she was told her dad died. Losing contact with River. Meeting Kingsley. Each foster home she was put in and taken out of, juvie, group home, school, jobs, running away.

It was all there, staring her in the face.

The pain. The heartaches. The loneliness. The fears.

She flipped through the pages, coming to a blank one.

With a deep breath, Kenna picked up a pencil and began to draw. Her hand moved almost instinctively, lining the contours of a familiar scene—a place she longed to be.

She drew a large home nestled among pine trees. In the doorway, she sketched a figure that looked like her but without the burden of her past weighing down her shoulders and stealing the light from her eyes.

Glancing across the room at her reflection in the mirror above the dresser, her eyes were determined. It was time to fill that blank page with hope. She knew it would take time to find her place in Gem Haven, but she knew her place in Kingsley's life and was ready to start living for her.

Whether she got to see her dad in prison or not, she could no longer live each day, wanting a small part of her past back. There was no going back, only forward.

As the pencil danced across the paper, liberation filled her. She wasn't drawing a picture. She was crafting her path forward, one line at a time.

The bedroom door opened. She looked up from the page to find Kingsley stepping inside. It hit her that the rest of the room had shadows, and she'd spent who knows how long drawing by the light on the nightstand. She scooped up her art supplies and put them on the floor, shoving them under the bed.

"I didn't hear you ride in." She got up and approached him.

Standing in front of him, she frowned. He hadn't taken his gaze off her or said a word.

"Are you okay?" She ran her hands over his chest. "Did something happen?"

He leaned down, kissing her hard. His heart pounded against the palms of her hand. It wasn't so much comfort coming from him but desperation—an emotion she'd never seen in him before.

He pulled back, shrugging out of his vest. She stood back, watching him get undressed. It was almost a violent act as he ripped his shirt off and kicked his boots across the room.

When he was naked, he sat on the edge of the bed, running his hands through his hair, his eyes fixated on the floor. She moved closer, hesitating, before sitting beside him.

"King," she whispered, "whatever it is, you can tell me."

He gathered her hand in his and led her to the attached bathroom. "Take a shower with me."

She took off her clothes and joined him under the spray of water.

A storm raged in his eyes. Not knowing what to do, she wrapped her arms around him and held her body against him. It worried her more when he lowered himself to his knees in the shower, hugged her legs to him pressed his head into her stomach, and remained there.

She stroked his head, threading her fingers through his hair and brushing it off his face. Warm water ran down her body, falling on him, but nothing moved him away from her. He held on as if she could save him from the world.

It was backward from how she'd walked through life, always running to or from him when she was scared.

Now, it was he who needed her.

She could feel the weight of his misery. The way his body shook slightly in her arms. The way his breath came in uneven gasps against her skin. She wanted to ask him what had happened, what had broken him so completely, but she was afraid of pushing him away.

Instead, she held him gently, comforting him.

She swallowed hard, having no experience comforting someone. But there was a time when she had a mom who would hold her and let her cry until she wore herself out. Once she finished her meltdown, her mom would stand her up and ask if she wanted ice cream—in which she always said yes.

God, she missed her mom. She hadn't let herself cry since the day she was told her mom was never coming back.

She stroked Kingsley, letting him take whatever he needed from her. He'd always been her anchor, now it was time for her to hold him while he found the strength to go forward.

After what felt like an eternity, he rubbed his face in her belly and stood. His eyes were no longer wild. There was a glimmer of something else—thankfulness, maybe.

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him, letting her lips linger for an extra beat. "I love you."

He nodded slightly. "Water is going to turn cold."

She switched places with him, knowing he wanted to wash the day's traumas off him. Having showered over an hour ago, she used that time to wash his body while he scrubbed his hair.

When they finished, she wrapped a towel around herself and walked into the bedroom, where she found a pair of joggers and a tank to put on.

"I'll be right back, okay?" She kissed him as he stretched out on the bed naked.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs for a few minutes." She hurried out of the room, down the steps, and into the kitchen.

She grabbed a tub of ice cream out of the freezer and filled two bowls. She returned to the bedroom, handed him the dish, and then climbed over him to sit cross-legged

on the bed.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"A treat." She shrugged. "At one time, ice cream always made me feel better."

He grunted. "I didn't know that."

"You don't know everything about me." She raked her teeth over her bottom lip. "But you'll learn."

Cold from the shower, she wiggled until her legs were under the blanket. The ice cream only made her shiver. Meanwhile, Kingsley lay there naked, unbothered by his nudity or the temperature in the room.

He concentrated on scooping bite after bite until he scraped the edge of the bowl with his spoon. "I went to Zora's cabin today."

She concentrated on her next bite of ice cream to hide her surprise. After the truth came out, he hadn't said much about Zora being his mom.

"Sounds like Dad tried to get her some help." He set the bowl to the side. "I couldn't tell if he kept her away from the club while trying to build the membership and start the businesses on Gem Haven or if she chose to stay away. Whichever way it was, Zora permitted him."

"How could she stay away from her kids?" She clamped her mouth shut, not meaning to blurt out the obvious. "I'm sorry. It's none of my—"

"Her mom committed suicide when she was seventeen. She was afraid of repeating the cycle. I didn't ask anymore. That says enough." He sighed.

"Yeah," she whispered, knowing that losing a parent changed her whole life.

Kingsley ran his hands over his face. "I talked to Zane afterward. There's not much we can do, considering Dad's the one who set Zora up in the cabin, and she likes living there. Big John will continue supplying her with food and helping her sell her flowers in town."

"It seems like a lonely life," she whispered.

"No, shit," he muttered. "Told her she was welcome at the house. But I'd like you and River to call me or Zane if she shows up until we know it's safe."

"You think she'll hurt someone?" she asked.

"I'd hope not, but now that I know she's our mom, I'll watch over her."

She leaned over and kissed him. "You're a good person, King."

He grunted. The darkness had left his eyes, and he seemed more relaxed than when he arrived home. She cuddled against him, wrapping her leg over his hip. It felt good to be able to help him when he needed her.

Kingsley

Big John walked into the bar. Kingsley motioned the V.P. to the back booth and scooted over, giving him room.

He pointed at the pitcher. "Grab a beer and knock the road dust off."

"Thanks." Big John filled the mug. "Rough ride. Traffic was stacked up on one another with all the fucking road construction going on, clogging everything up."

Zane planted his elbows on the table and steepled his hands together. "What did you find out about Valdones?"

Big John had gone to Federal to meet with the president of Moroad Motorcycle Club to learn how dangerous Valdones' threat to Gem Haven was.

Big John took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No one needs to tell us that Valdones is bad news. They've got ties with Los Li, and the Cartel isn't afraid to use them. It's why they're putting the heat on us, trying to push into our territory. They've tried before, and they'll keep trying."

Kingsley's jaw tightened. "We can't let that happen. What about the other clubs in the area? Think they'll back us up?"

"Some will, some won't. Moroad is with us, but we need more allies if we're going to

keep Gem Haven safe." Big John's voice grew low and serious. "We're surrounded by other clubs. We need to take advantage of that, or we'll lose a lot of men."

Zane nodded. "I've taken that into account."

Kingsley leaned back, considering the implications. Zane wasn't afraid of using other clubs to keep a strong barrier around Gem Haven. Valdones were pushing closer and closer to them.

The stakes were higher with their dad in prison, unable to help. It was up to them to keep the members safe.

Big John leaned forward. "Who can we trust to stand with us?"

Zane's lips curled. "I've got a phone meeting lined up with Ronacks Motorcycle Club. We'll start there. They might be interested in a mutual defense pact. They've had their run-ins with Valdones, too."

"Good. The more pressure we put on Valdones, the better."

"Should we call a meeting?" asked Big John.

"Not yet." Zane finished his beer. "We're going to stay calm, stay aware, and if need be, come out shooting."

The three men exchanged nods, knowing they'd do what was necessary. Over the months, they'd built their armory. The members were ready. Zane had put the youngest members with seasoned members and trained them in how Gem Haven handles threats. They were all armed, and most importantly, the mountain was secure once again, as they'd stopped Valdones from burning them out.

River and Kenna walked into the bar, talking to each other. Kingsley's gut tightened. That right there was why he'd protect Gem Haven with his life.

He wanted a safe place for Kenna.

"The girls are here," said Zane.

No one needed to tell him when Kenna walked into a room. His body was attuned to her.

He slapped Big John's arm and motioned for him to get out of the booth so he could leave the table. "I'll catch you both later."

He approached Kenna and stood behind her until she stopped talking. Then he put his hand on the back of her neck. She turned with a smile on her face, knowing it was him.

He kissed her softened lips. He'd take every stolen moment to show the world who she belonged to.

"Rested?" he asked.

Since it was her day off, and he had to meet Zane at the clubhouse, he let her sleep after having sex with her that morning. They were busy dealing with the men until the afternoon.

"I slept until one o'clock." She wound her arms around his waist. "I can't believe how tired I was."

He grinned, knowing he'd worn her out. She pinched his side where he was ticklish. He squirmed without letting her go.

"Hungry?" He chuckled, rubbing his side against her.

She shook her head. "River made me a grilled cheese sandwich after I woke up. You?"

"Just finished eating." He looked into her eyes, wanting to escape and have her to himself. "Up for a ride?"

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "Always."

He made eye contact with Zane and motioned his head toward the door, letting him know he was taking off before leaving. He kissed her hard at the Harley before throwing his leg over the seat. She climbed behind him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist.

The engine roared to life. He looped around and took the way out of Gem Haven but before he reached the county road, he turned and stopped at the gate. They locked it to keep the trespassers out and let the campers know they'd need to hike in. It was too beautiful an area to let mud crawlers in the off-season and teenagers spraying graffiti on tree trunks and rock croppings ruin everything.

He shut off the bike. "Hang tight."

Getting off the motorcycle, he walked to the gate, used the key to unlock the chain, and pushed the gate open.

Kenna got off the Harley and walked toward him. "Go ahead and ride through. I'll close it behind you."

"Just fling the chain over the bar. I'll lock up when we leave." He jogged over to the motorcycle.

Moving forward, he waited until she finished and climbed back onto the motorcycle. A few members would smooth the ruts made by the spring thaw each year. Eventually, grass grew over the terrain. He rode slowly. While it wasn't asphalt, it was nice enough to enjoy the ride to the peak.

The landscape rushed by in a blur of green and brown. He pointed out the woodpecker hammering against the trunk of a spruce tree to Kenna. She hugged his waist tighter. He'd always wanted to show her his world, and now she was here.

The vistas came into view. He rode to the end of the trail at the top of the highest mountain peak in Gem Haven and parked the Harley.

He patted her leg and motioned for her to get off the bike. After he dismounted, he walked to the edge and held out his hand to her, beckoning her forward. She came to him and peered over the edge into the valley below.

From their advantage point, he could make out the river that went through the southern piece of the property and wound its way to the edge of the campground. But what drew his attention was where the clubhouse sat with the bar farther in the distance.

Looking beyond the bar, he could see the house nestled in the trees.

"Wow." Kenna threaded her fingers between his fingers and held his hand. "It's like being on top of the world. It almost makes me dizzy."

He pulled her in front of him and wrapped his arms around her, holding her securely to him. "Just breathe."

"Are we still in Gem Haven?" she asked.

"Yep."

She pressed her back against him. "I never thought it was possible to own so much land. I mean, there are ranches around, but this is all wild and rugged wilderness."

His dad worked his ass off to purchase the property. He'd handed over every dime he had saved, knowing someday it would be worth more than money could buy.

"Are you happy here?"

She lifted her hands and held on to his crossed arms. "I'm happy with you. I'm happy that I have my sister in my life again. But..."

He kissed the top of her head. "Tell me."

"Don't get me wrong. I want to be with you. I wouldn't change anything about us ." She turned in his arms and faced him. "I feel pulled in two different directions. My dad's in prison and he's going to die, and it doesn't matter that I've already lost him once. I know he's sitting in a cell by himself, thinking today will be his last or maybe tomorrow. I can't even imagine that kind of pain. And yet, I can't connect him to the crimes he committed. The people he killed. I'm not—I'm not—"

"Sh. I know." He cupped her face, hating to see her struggle.

"Even though I should feel sympathy for the people he killed and their families, I can't let go of how I feel." She patted her chest. "I need my dad. I've always needed him, and he's not here for me."

"Kenna." He pressed his lips to her forehead, her nose, her cheek, her lips. "You're so fucking strong."

"I don't feel strong." Her voice shook, but she held the emotions in.

She never cried. Even when she had reasons to shed the tears filling her, she held them in.

"Shit." She inhaled swiftly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to turn this into a whine-fest. You brought me up here, and it's beautiful." She stretched to her tiptoes and kissed his lips. "You're beautiful. A beautiful soul."

He kissed her hard. "I brought you up here to give you something."

"Me?" She frowned. "What?"

He took her hand and led her back to the motorcycle. Yesterday, he'd run into town with a wild idea. He wasn't sure she'd accept his gift or understand why he bought it for her. He wanted to give her something she once enjoyed.

He removed the cord from his duffle bag and set it on the seat of his Harley. Stepping back, he motioned for her to open the bag. "Unzip it," he said.

She hesitated for a moment, then reached for the pull tab. Her fingers trembled slightly as she slowly pulled it open. Her eyes widened as she looked back at him.

"You used to draw all the time." He stepped beside her. "You were always giving me papers you'd sketched on."

"Oh, God. They were probably so bad." She leaned against him.

"I still have them," he whispered.

"You do?"

"Every single one. They're in a box in the apartment above the garage."

She sighed happily. "I never expected you to keep them."

Hell, he used to study each picture as if it would give him the answers he needed to get inside her head. She would never know how much they meant to him.

"You don't have to draw if you don't want—"

"Are you kidding me?" She threw her arms around him. "Ever since we arrived, I've thought of how nice it would be to sketch the view and remember this day forever."

"What are you waiting for?" He kissed her hard and stepped back. "Go ahead."

"Now?"

He shrugged. "I'm in no hurry. The sun won't go down for a couple more hours."

There was no hesitation. She grabbed the duffle with her free hand and led him back to the edge of the peak.

"Sit." She pointed to the ground.

He thought of arguing that he was too old to sit in the dirt, but her look meant business, and he couldn't turn her down. Lowering himself to the ground, he groaned when a rock dug into his hip. She stepped between his legs and sat down in front of him.

For several minutes, she went through all her supplies. Ultimately picking out a pack of pencils. The woman at the art store claimed they were perfect for sketching. Then, Kena lifted out the smaller sketchpad. She leaned her back against his chest, propped

her knees up, and put the pencil on paper.

He never took his eyes off the paper as she made the view come to life in front of him.

Kenna

River closed the dishwasher. Kenna threw the dishcloth into the sink. Each day that passed without a phone call from the prison approving their visit with her dad made her think they were waiting for nothing.

"I'm just saying, if we go and talk to the person who handles the forms, maybe we can find out when the papers will get put in front of the judge." She planted her hands on her hips. "I'll drive."

"No." River walked out of the kitchen.

Frustrated, she followed her sister. "Why not?"

"Because, we have to wait until we hear from the prison."

"Have you Googled to find out how they treat prisoners on death row?" She stopped at the base of the stairs as her sister walked up the steps. "He gets twenty minutes outside in a pen, no bigger than a dog kennel, three times a week. Most dogs are treated better than him."

River whirled around at the top of the stairs. "He killed people, Kenna. When are you going to get that through your head? He's not on vacation. They're going to kill him for what he's done."

Her heart pounded in her chest. "Don't—"

"They will, and there's nothing we can do to stop them." River raised her arms. "I don't even think we should try to see him."

Staring at her sister as if she'd turned into someone else she no longer knew, she went to the front door and stormed out of the house. Every day she waited for a phone call or a letter or some message from the prison, and nothing ever came.

She jogged away from the house, going toward the woods. The bar had customers. The clubhouse had bikers. The campground had campers. All she wanted to do was get away from everyone—people living their lives as if nothing was wrong.

"Kenna," yelled River.

She refused to turn around and kept going. Dodging behind a tree, she found a path that led her deeper into the woods.

The pine trees blocked her every turn. She slowed her pace. No amount of running would let her escape the harsh realities of her life.

She stumbled into a small clearing, bathed in the soft light of the evening sun. Her stomach churned in a tangled mess of anger, sadness, and frustration. As the oldest daughter, she was supposed to watch over River. She was supposed to keep the family together.

She'd failed at doing her job.

Sinking to the ground, she bowed her head and closed her eyes. The ache in her chest was a constant reminder of her dad's fate. She couldn't accept what the future held for her dad. He might've taken the lives of others, but he'd given her life. He'd loved her.

"Kenna?" River breathed heavily. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. There was no use talking about their situation. River had always adapted better than her and never questioned what she was told.

"I know you're upset, but—"

"I can't lose him, River." She raised her gaze. "He's the last link we have to a real family. It doesn't matter if he's a bad person. At one time, he was the best dad."

Her sister dropped to her knees beside her. "I know," she whispered. "We'll figure it out together."

"Will you go to the prison with me?"

River nodded. "I'm just afraid. You have your hopes up, and the situation is hopeless."

"I'm not delusional." She grabbed River's hand. "I would take one visit with him over never seeing him again. Wouldn't you?"

River sighed. "Yeah."

After several minutes, she allowed River to pull her to her feet. In the quiet of the forest, she walked side by side with her sister, united in their grief. A grief that she'd lived with for half her life.

As they approached the edge of the forest, River stopped her. "You know I'm going to have to tell Zane we're going to the prison, right?"

Kenna's heart sank at the thought. As much as she would like to sneak away and not

inform Kingsley, she knew it was impossible. He'd never allow her to leave.

"I know." She swallowed hard. "Kingsley would kill me if I snuck away. We'll have to convince them to let us travel to the prison. Do whatever you need to make Zane let you go, okay?"

"Okay." River stepped out of the trees and stopped. "Shit."

"What?"

"Look." River turned to her. "At the front of the house."

She squinted and groaned under her breath. Kingsley and Zane were waiting for them. She could tell by his body language that she'd upset him by running away from the house.

She sighed. "Come on, let's go tell them that nothing is wrong."

"Zane will never believe me," muttered River.

"Neither will Kingsley, but I've got to try." She strode forward, determination making her stronger than she was feeling.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

Smoker walked into the office of the clubhouse. Kingsley picked up the bag on the desk and tossed it across the room.

"Hey, thanks." Smoker grabbed the handles and flung the bag over his shoulder. "I was looking for this."

"You left it in the cabin. One of the cleaning girls found it." Kingsley picked up a baggie of weed and tossed it to Smoker. "She found this, too."

Smoker stuffed the bag in his vest pocket. "That's not mine, but I'll take it."

"Do you need the truck?" Zane kicked back in the chair and put his boots on the desk.

"Nah." Smoker chuckled. "Don't have anything but bags."

"If you need to come back, just let us know." Zane latched his hands behind his head.

"Thanks, Prez." Smoker walked out of the office.

Smoker had lived in one of the cabins behind the clubhouse for the last year. He only recently decided to move into town with some woman he met. Kingsley shut the door. Members would often move out of Gem Haven if they looked toward settling down. Women tended to demand more from them, and the clubhouse had too many

parties and girls. It made for jealous ol' ladies.

A knock came. Still by the door, Kingsley opened it again.

Guy stood in the hallway and pointed toward the main room. "The delivery truck is at the bar."

Kingsley looked at Zane. His brother put his feet on the floor and walked past him.

"Take the keys for the truck," said Zane from the hallway.

Kingsley stayed behind. Every week, after the delivery to the bar, two of the kegs and several of the bottles were brought up to the clubhouse. The state's stringent liquor permit process banned the clubhouse from purchasing alcohol within close proximity to the bar, so they ordered extras and transported them to the clubhouse themselves.

The landline phone on the desk rang. He picked it up, expecting Lori with news about the kegs. "Yeah?"

"I'm calling for Kenna Pruitt," said a woman.

His skin prickled. Kenna was at the bar working, and hesitated on giving the phone number out without knowing who was calling.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"This is Idaho State Penitentiary calling for Kenna Pruitt."

Fuck. He thrust his hand in his hair. Kenna had waited for the day they would contact her, but he wanted to make sure he was there when she received the news. If the judge denied her visitation request, she'd be devastated.

A big part of him wanted to tell the woman Kenna wasn't there and that she'd moved on, and he had no idea how to contact her. It was the only way he could protect her.

But, he wouldn't do that to her. He couldn't.

"She's working. I can give you the phone number of where to reach her," he said.

"Is it 555-3190? She's given us two numbers on the form."

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Thank you for your help. Goodbye."

The call disconnected. Kingsley set the phone down and shot out of the office.

Running through the clubhouse, he pushed men aside as he flew out the door. His Harley was twenty feet away, but it might as well have been a mile. His chest hammered, needing to get to her.

By the time he parked in front of the bar, rushed inside, and found Kenna, she was already on the phone with her back toward him.

Her rounded shoulders never moved. Ignoring everyone else in the room, he walked straight to her. Standing beside her, he tried to overhear the conversation, but Kenna wasn't saying anything.

She stared at her feet with the phone pressed to her ear. He couldn't tell how the call was going. Having dealt with his dad in prison and planning visitations, he was familiar with the emotions that a person goes through, but Kenna's dad wasn't just an inmate. He was on death row. The rules were different.

"Goodbye," she whispered.

She slowly lowered her arm and disconnected the call. White as a ghost, she swayed, catching herself on the back counter.

He grabbed her arm, steadying her. She looked up at him, barely any recognition in her eyes. Her lower lip trembled. He brought her to his chest, afraid she'd faint. She'd put all her energy into believing her dad wanted to see her. If, at the end, she was denied a visit, it would break her.

He cupped her head, absorbing the tremors rolling through her. The only sign that she was aware of him there was that she leaned into him, letting him support her.

Rebecca approached with her brows pinched. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. She needs a minute. Can you cover the bar?" he asked.

"Sure." Her eyes softened. "Take as much time as you need."

He guided Kenna through the kitchen, ignoring Lori's concerned look, and led her out the back door. Alone, he leaned against the building and lifted Kenna's face, needing to see more light in her eyes. The pain he'd witnessed killed him.

"Talk to me." He smoothed her hair out of her face.

The muscles in her throat convulsed. "Th-the judge granted River and me permission to visit with Dad on the twenty-eighth of this month." She grabbed onto his vest. "What day is it?"

"The fourteenth."

Her knees buckled. He scooped her up, holding her against him.

"Two weeks." She looked around wildly. "I need to find River."

"She's working at the campground."

Kenna frowned and looked at her phone. "I still have an hour until my lunch break." She gasped for air. "It's so far away."

"Breathe."

She looked at him. "What?"

"You're not breathing right."

"I can't." She swallowed. "I'm going to see my Dad."

He nodded. The shock was wearing off her.

Everyone had told her that her dad was dead. The one that turned out alive but sitting on death row. She could lose him at any moment. He held on to her. All she wanted to do was see him one more time.

"Oh, my God." She grabbed her throat. "What do I say? What is he going to say to me?"

"Sh." He rubbed her back. "You'll find out when you go. Right now, take the rest of the day off, and I'll walk you over to the campground. Then you can tell River."

"I can't leave Lori and Rebecca by themselves."

"Then, take your break now and talk to your sister." He motioned for her to go inside. "Let Lori know you'll be back at four o'clock."

She hurried inside, more in control of herself when she had something to do. He hoped a few minutes alone with River would calm her down. She was going to let her anxiety beat her up. There were two weeks until the visit—a lot could happen in prison during that time.

Kenna pushed through the back door. "Lori told me it's okay to take an early lunch." She grabbed his hand. "I'm going to find River."

It would take longer if he took her over there on his Harley. Instead, he grabbed her hand and headed toward the trail that led to the campground. There was no slowing down so she could keep up with his longer strides. Kenna jogged the whole way, making the walk in half the usual time.

She broke away from him as the cabin came into sight. He followed at a slower pace, knowing she needed support from her sister more than anything.

Phil walked out of the cabin, almost running into Kingsley. "Sorry-sorry."

He clapped the man on the shoulder. "How's it going, Phil?"

"Right as rain." Phil brushed his hands together. "Business is good."

"Thank fuck for that, huh?" Kingsley pointed toward the cabin. "Kenna and River received some news they've been waiting for. Do you think you can spare River for an hour?"

"No problem." Phil backed up. "I'll let her know she's off the clock."

He dipped his chin in thanks. Several minutes later, both girls came out of the cabin. From the paleness on River's face, Kenna had time to tell her what was going on.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Is Zane coming, too?"

River's gaze flooded with tears. There was nothing he could do. She wanted Zane.

"I'll get him for you." He stepped into the doorway of the cabin. "Hey, Phil. Ring Zane. He's outside the bar. Tell him to get over here."

"Will do."

He returned to the girls. Neither one talked.

River chewed her thumbnail. Kenna hugged her middle. While her sister dashed tears off her cheek, Kenna never cried, but the pain and fear she experienced was etched into her furrowed brows.

That hurt him more than if she fell apart.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

—Nine years ago—

Kenna pressed her back against the brick wall. "Who are you?"

"My name's Kingsley."

"You're not a king."

He looked down at this black leather vest, his beard, and the tattoos on his arms. She was right. "I'm a member of Gem Haven Motorcycle Club."

Kenna balled her fists. "Why are you following me?"

"So you do remember seeing me before."

She clamped her lips together. He'd witnessed the day the state took River away from Kenna.

He lit a cigarette and stayed by the curb where he'd parked his Harley. "It took me a while to find you."

It cost him two dates with the woman who worked in the state office to convince her to give him the address of where they'd taken Kenna. Plus, another thousand dollars

to keep her quiet.

"My brother, Zane, and I are going to watch over you and your sister to make sure you're safe and protected."

"Why?"

He pressed his lips together to keep his amusement in check. She was spunky and curious. From what Zane had told him, Kenna's sister had accepted him watching over her without any question.

Not this one.

She was going to be a handful.

"Because the state can only do so much." He stubbed his cigarette out. "Do you like where you're staying?"

"What kind of question is that?" She wrinkled her nose. "I didn't ask to come here. I want my sister back, and I want to go home."

Her mom was deceased. Her dad was sitting on death row, though she believed he was dead. There was no way she could ever go home again.

"How's school?"

She blew out her lips and shook her head. He wasn't going to get any answers from her.

He looked around at the 7-11, knowing she lived two blocks away. At twelve years old, she was mature enough to walk home after school or stop in at the store.

There was no use staying and pestering her for answers. He could see that she was unharmed. Nobody could blame her for her attitude. She'd gone through hell in the last year.

"I'll check with you in a few weeks to see how you're doing." He backed up and put his leg over his Harley. "Is there anything you want River to know? I can pass on a message to her."

"Are you lying?" She stepped forward.

Her tone and expression stayed strong, but her chin trembled. His gut tightened. She was too young to endure the hardships that life had thrown at her.

"I would never lie to you." He put his hands on his thighs. "My brother Zane is watching over River like I'm watching over you. Nothing is going to happen to either one of you. Until you're back together, if you need to tell River something, you can send a message through me."

She looked away and hugged her middle. He waited, not wanting to leave if she had something she wanted to tell him.

A car attempted to turn around in the parking lot, coming near where Kenna stood. She stepped closer to him, getting out of the way.

"Is she okay?" asked Kenna.

He took out the new phone he'd brought with him, glad Zane had thought to purchase one for each girl and take a picture of River for him to share with Kenna. He handed her the cell. "Look for yourself."

River stared hard at the screen, blinking furiously but not letting any trapped tears

fall. He wanted to hug her, tell her it would be okay, and that what seemed hard now would get easier to accept. But he knew it wouldn't help. Right now, she needed her sister.

She thrust the phone at him. "You're coming back?"

He nodded.

"Can you take another picture of River?"

"Yep." He handed the cell back to her. "Can you hide this phone and keep it with you so if you need help, you can call me?"

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." He lifted her chin. "Do you want to send a picture back with me, so Zane can show your sister?"

"Yeah." River slid the phone into her pocket.

He took out his cell and held it up but paused before taking her picture. "Smile."

Her lips never moved. She stared hard at the phone. River would see how unhappy her sister was. But it couldn't be helped.

"Got it." He put the phone away. "You better get home."

"It's not my home." She stepped away from him and went back to leaning against the wall of the 7-11.

"My numbers in the phone. Use it if you need anything."

"What about my sister? Can I have her number?" she asked.

He shook his head. "It's safer this way."

They agreed that letting the girls call back and forth would only cause more problems. The phones were for their own safety.

He started his Harley and rode away.

Circling the block, he parked across from the store with a clear view of Kenna. After a few minutes, she slid her back down the wall and sat on the concrete, pulling out the phone he'd given her and staring at the screen.

He swallowed hard, knowing her life sucked right now and there was nothing he could do to change that.

Kenna

"I have nothing to wear." She stood in front of the closet. "Everything I own came from a thrift store in Billings when I got a job at a bar."

"You can borrow any of my clothes." River sat on the bed, going through a pile of shirts. "Not that I have anything spectacular."

"I'm not looking for spectacular." She removed a pair of jeans off a hanger and put them right back up. "I'm looking for something without holes."

"We could order a new outfit to wear to the prison," said River.

She grabbed her phone off the dresser and turned away from her meager belongings. "We might as well. What kind of clothes do you want to wear?"

River shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe a dress."

Zane knocked on the opened door. River stretched her arm out, motioning for him to come in.

"I thought you were staying up at the clubhouse." River kissed him.

Kingsley walked into the room behind his brother. Kenna frowned. The men never came home at the same time or walked into her bedroom together.

Her stomach rolled. Panic set in. Maybe the prison called and informed Zane that the visit with her dad was canceled.

Kingsley met her gaze. She shook her head, trying to read his expression, but couldn't tell what was happening. She pressed her hand to her chest, rubbing her collarbone. He must have bad news. That would be the only explanation of why he'd bring his brother with him.

"We're going through our clothes." River threw her arms around Zane's waist. "We've decided to order something to wear off Amazon for our upcoming prison visit." She looked up into his face. "I don't have a dress, and since I haven't seen my dad in—"

"No dress." Zane cleared his throat. "You'll get pulled for a more intense inspection before you can even go inside because they can't tell what you have underneath the material."

River frowned. "Then what do we wear?"

"A pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt."

Kingsley palmed the back of her neck and whispered, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. The closer they got to the day they could visit her dad, the more afraid she got that something would happen to stop her from seeing him—and then they'd kill him, and she'd never have a chance to see him again. Her nightmares were starting to invade her waking hours.

"Well, I guess there's no need to buy anything." River looked at Kenna. "Do you have any pants without rips?"

She nodded. There were a couple that were a little big on her that she rarely wore.

"Do you want to get something to eat at the bar?" asked Kingsley.

Not feeling like joining them, Kenna made her excuses to stay at the house. When the other two left, Kingsley forced her to look at him.

"What's going on?"

"There are only five more days until we go to the prison." She moistened her lips. "I'm scared it's going to get canceled."

He kissed her softly. "Stop worrying."

"I can't help it."

He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. "You need to eat."

"You can go to the bar."

He chuckled. "I want you more."

Tap-tap-tap

She looked behind her. "Was that someone at the door?"

"I'll go check." He let her go. "It might be Big John. He was going to swing by and give some papers to Zane."

As he left the room, she moved to the bed and went through her shirts again. There were two without anything printed on the front that looked okay, so she set those in the top drawer of the dresser. Later, she'd pick out the jeans she'd wear and add them to the pile. She wanted to prepare early because she'd be a mental case the day they

were due to travel to the prison.

"Hey, Kenna. Can you come down here for a sec?" yelled Kingsley.

"Coming." She set the pile of shirts on the dresser and walked out into the hallway.

At the top of the stairs, she found Kingsley standing with Zora in the foyer. Quickly assessing the situation, she relaxed. His mom seemed calm and had a sweet smile on her face.

"Can you do me a favor and grab three burgers and fries from the bar?" he asked.

Understanding that his mom was staying to eat, she nodded. "Sure. Anything else?"

He looked at his mom. She shook her head.

"I'll grab my shoes and head over there." She left mother and son alone, wondering how Kingsley felt about the visit.

He'd given Zora permission to visit the house, not knowing if she'd take him up on it. It had to make him feel good that she reached out.

Once she had her sneakers on and descended the stairs, she could hear them in the kitchen talking quietly. She slipped out the front door and walked to the bar.

As soon as she got inside, River rushed her. "Is everything okay?"

They were both on edge, waiting for the prison to cancel their visit. She grabbed River's hand and led her toward the kitchen. Not everyone needed to know Kingsley's private business.

"Zora came over. Kingsley wants me to grab food for us. I think she's staying to eat with him," she whispered.

River looked over her shoulder at Zane. "Do you think Zane needs to go to the house?"

"I don't think so." She hesitated. "I mean, maybe. I think Kingsley's happy that his mom showed up. Maybe Zane would like the chance to talk with her, too. What do you think?"

"I think he's confused about why Zora stepped out of his life." River shrugged. "Should I run the idea by him?"

"Go ahead." She peered over her sister's shoulder. "You haven't eaten yet?"

"We just finished ordering our food."

She pushed River toward Zane. "Go ask him if he wants me to make your order to-go, and we can carry the food home."

Once River nodded at her to get the food, she went into the kitchen. Nerves made her anxious. What if she was doing the wrong thing? Having both Stafford men around at the same time was overwhelming. She wasn't trying to frighten Zora away. They were her sons.

"I'm surprised to see you today, " Lori said, flipping a burger on the grill. "You must be looking for something to eat."

"I have an order if you're not too busy."

"Give it to me." Lori removed the hamburger patty and set it on a bun.

"I need three cheeseburgers and a family-size order of fries to-go." She walked over to the order wheel and looked for the paper from the booth. "Zane and River are in Booth Three and decided to take their meals to-go, too."

"Oh." Lori grinned. "Sounds like you four are up to no good."

"Something like that." She smiled.

What Zane and Kingsley did in their free time was no one's business. Their relationship with Zora was fragile at best. Even though Lori claimed a friendship with Zora in the past, it was best to go slow until they knew how she would handle having more people in her life. From the impression she got, Zora enjoyed her solitude.

In no time, Lori had their food packaged and put in a box. When Kenna walked out the bar's back door, Zane and River were waiting for her.

Zane took the box from her. She walked with them, each of them silent. This was the first meal they planned to have with Zora. She imagined they were all a little nervous, not knowing what to expect.

Zane led them all into the house and to the kitchen. Kingsley sat at the table with Zora. She smiled and motioned to the others. "Guess who I found?"

"We thought we'd crash your dinner." Zane set the box on the island and passed the sacks to Kingsley.

"As long as you brought your own food." Kingsley snatched two Styrofoam containers and handed them to Zora and Kenna.

She sat beside him and put her hand on his thigh under the table. "There's napkins in the box."

"I've got them." River removed the stack, broke it in half, and set two piles on the table. "Does anyone need anything to drink before I sit? Zora?"

"No, thank you." Zora smiled, taking a French fry. "The last time I had food from the bar, Big John brought me a BLT last year. Did Lori cook this?"

"Yeah, she's too stubborn to share the kitchen with anyone." Zane sat down on the other side of his mom.

"That sounds like her," said Zora.

No one mentioned that only a few short weeks ago, Zora had shown up at the bar and seen Lori herself. Everyone pretended that having the mother who left them when Zane and Kingsley were young boys sharing a meal with them was normal.

She glanced at River, who shrugged and picked up her burger. Who was she to decide what was normal? In a few days, she'd visit her dad in prison and pretend he wasn't going to be put to death.

No wonder she and Kingsley fell in love with each other. The drama of their lives bonded them together.

Kingsley

"Kenna?" Kingsley took the stairs two at a time. "Hey, brat?"

Lori called up to the clubhouse, looking for Kenna twenty minutes ago. She hadn't shown up to work at the bar. Since moving to Gem Haven and working, she'd never been late. She also had never run away.

She'd grown and got past needing to escape him. The truth was out. She accepted, if not forgave him, that he'd lied and kept her dad a secret. There was no reason for her to take off.

He pushed the door open and scanned the empty bedroom. "Fuck."

River was at the campground. Zane had verified her location before Kingsley left the clubhouse. That meant wherever Kenna was, she was alone.

He rushed to the window and peered down at the ground. Her car was still parked by the garage where it had sat since she came here. She couldn't get far.

"Kenna?" He checked the bathroom before running down the stairs to the kitchen. "Where are you?"

The house was empty. His heart thundered in his chest. He hoped someone from the prison hadn't called the house, upset her, and she'd taken off in a blind panic.

He walked outside. She could be anywhere. He had no idea where to start looking.

She wasn't inside, so she had to be outside. Gem Haven had hundreds of acres and rugged terrain. He walked to the corner of the house, peered down the side, and continued to the backyard. He scanned the deck and almost turned around when the brown cover of Kenna's sketchpad caught his attention.

He jogged over to the lounge chair and found her case of pencils scattered on the wood planks. Kenna always took care of her art supplies. She always kept her pencils lined up in the case by thickness. The sketchbooks stacked by size, so the pages wouldn't bend.

He opened the book. Thumbing through the pages, he came to the last one with any drawings. Recognizing the familiar landscape, he looked out toward the woods. She had to have come out here before work and drawn. But what made her scatter her supplies and leave?

His phone vibrated. He grabbed the cell out of his vest pocket. Zane.

He connected the call. "Did you find her?"

"No, not yet. Have you tried calling her phone?"

"Yeah, it goes to voicemail. Cell service is so fucking spotty on the mountain, she could be twenty feet from me, and I couldn't reach her." He stared at the sketchbook in his hand. "Her art supplies are all over the back deck like she dropped them in a hurry. That's not like her. She pampers her pencils and drawings."

"If she was sitting back there, maybe a bear or moose wandered into the yard and freaked her out," said Zane.

He looked back at the house. The sliding door was shut. She wasn't inside.

"I already looked through the house. I'm going to look around more. Call if you see her."

He pocketed the phone. If she hadn't gone to the house, then she went away from the house. He jogged across the yard and into the brush. It was sparse enough that he could walk toward the base of the next hill without any problem.

"Kenna," he yelled, picking up his boots higher to get through the tall weeds and underbrush. "Kenna!"

"Here."

He stopped, unsure if he had heard the reply or not. "Kenna?"

"I'm here."

Instant relief left him breathless. "Keep talking."

He set off, moving farther away from the house. As she talked, he veered right, climbing the hill.

"I can see you," she yelled.

He gazed ahead of him, spotting the waving arm. Seeing her on her feet and jumping gave him his second wind. She wasn't hurt.

Jogging across the span separating him from Kenna, he arrived a few minutes later. He swept his gaze over her, making sure she was okay.

"Fucking hell, brat. You scared me." He pulled her to him.

With her in his arms, he could see what drew her out into the forest. Behind her sat Zora, propped against a rock, holding her ankle.

"I'm so glad you found me. There's no signal for my phone anywhere—trust me, I've paced back and forth, and nothing." She pulled back. "Zora twisted her ankle. I heard her yelling for help."

"Don't be mad at Kenna. She wouldn't leave me and swore you'd come and find her if she failed to show up at work," said Zora.

"Oh, did she?" He cocked his brow.

Kenna looked at him and whispered, "You're my person. You always find me."

His touch softened on the back of her neck, and he strummed her skin with his thumb. Losing her was impossible. He needed her in his life. Without her, nothing mattered.

He stepped over and squatted beside Zora. "Let's see your ankle."

"I stepped into a prairie dog hole." His mom pulled up the hem of her jeans.

Her ankle was swollen above her sneaker. But she moved her foot without too much difficulty.

"I'll go back and get the side-by-side, and then we'll see about getting you to the hospital," he said.

"It's not broken." Zora frowned. "Is Barney still around?"

Barney was ancient but still practiced medicine around the clubhouse. He hid his surprise that Zora knew the old man. But a sprained or twisted ankle was right up the old man's alley.

"Yep. I'll give him a call when I get back to the garage." He straightened and walked a few yards away with Kenna. "Are you okay to stay with her?"

"Of course." She wrinkled her nose. "Can you also call the bar and let Lori and Rebecca know I'll be there as soon as I can?"

"Don't worry about it. Zane already sent Taylor to cover for you tonight."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You scared the shit out of me when I couldn't find you."

"I didn't mean—"

"I get it." He inhaled deeply, trying to shake the worry. "Thanks for helping Zora."

She kissed him quickly and sent him on his way. He jogged back toward the house. Once he stood in front of the garage, cell service came back, thanks to the booster. He made the necessary calls, grabbed the keys off the hook, took the first UTV he came to and headed back out to pick up Zora and Kenna.

Luck was on his side. Barney was at the clubhouse. Now they had to cross their fingers that he wasn't too drunk to check out Zora's ankle.

Dodging pine trees and boulders, he zigzagged his way to where he'd left the two women. There was only room for two people, but he wasn't planning on leaving

Kenna behind while he helped his mom.

He got Zora into the passenger seat without causing her too much pain. Most of the discomfort seemed to come from putting weight on her foot.

"Kenna, go ahead and get in the driver's seat." He walked around to the other side.

"Me?"

He motioned for her to get inside the rig. "You'll drive back."

"I don't know how to drive this." She slid behind the steering wheel.

"It's just like a car." He reached in and turned the key on. "Put your foot on the accelerator lightly and go slow."

"How are you getting back?"

"Same way you are." He gripped the overhead bar and put his boot on the skid plate. "Let's go."

As he hung off the side, she navigated the UTV over the land with pure determination. Going slow enough, the rough terrain failed to dislodge him. When they arrived at the back of the house, they found Zane and Barney waiting for them.

He leaned into the side-by-side. "Let Zane carry you into the house. Barney will take a look at your ankle."

"Thank you." Zora scooted to the edge of the seat and turned toward his brother. "And thank you. I never expected either of you to help me or sweet Kenna for coming to rescue me. All I wanted to do was bring over some flowers for the girls after they

were so nice to include me in your dinner the other night."

"Not a problem." Zane picked her up and carried her to the house.

Kenna got out of the UTV. "I hope she'll be okay."

"A little rest and some ice, and she'll probably be fine." He looped his arm around her shoulders.

"I should get over to the bar."

"Take the rest of the day off."

"But—"

"Don't argue." He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "You can help me deal with Zora."

"She's your mom." She wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Yeah." He frowned at the house. "Yet, I have no idea how to deal with having a mom in my life."

"Count yourself lucky." She leaned into him. "You're doing everything right by not shutting her out of your life. I think she appreciates having the freedom to come to the house. She was heading this way when she twisted her ankle."

He kissed the top of her head. His mom's arrival only reminded him that he and Zane needed to put another visit in with Dad. Once they got the girls to the prison to visit with Tom Pruitt aka Burt Shay, it would be time to settle down with dear ol' Dad and find out what the fuck was going on with him and Zora.

Kenna

"Morning," Kenna murmured.

Kingsley peeled open his eyes, blinking into the soft glow of the sun filtering through the curtains. She stood in the doorway, anxious and jittery.

"I brought you coffee." She approached the bed.

"You're up early," he said, his voice a sleepy rasp. "We don't have to leave until nine o'clock."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "I couldn't sleep. I have too much on my mind."

They were all four going to the state prison. Zane and River. Kingsley and her. She was finally going to see her dad.

Kingsley studied her. She dropped her gaze, uncomfortable with spilling her feelings. It was apparent that she was scared.

He cupped her cheek, turning her toward him. His hungry gaze made her stomach flip.

Setting the mug on the dresser, he said, "Come here and let me show you everything will be okay."

Her pulse quickened. She knew that tone. The one that signaled a shift from their usual conversation to something deeper.

She leaned over, and he flipped her across his body and onto the bed, leaning over her and capturing her mouth. His kiss was anything but gentle. It was as if he had planned to devour her.

Kenna wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him closer. The fierce ache building inside of her all night when she thought about today's visit became a hunger only he could appease. She needed him desperately. Nothing like the slow, sweet love they made last night. She needed that emptiness eating away inside of her filled with Kingsley's support and love.

She kissed him frantically, hands roaming over his bare skin. Her shirt was the first to go, tossed aside before he hooked his thumbs into the sides of her panties, dragging them off her hips.

She pulled back. Kingsley's eyes devoured her. She ran her hands over the sculpted muscles of his chest. His tattoos told stories of his past and his loyalty to Gem Haven.

He was beautiful and rugged, and so dedicated to everyone and everything in his life. But with her, he made her heart pound twice as fast.

He pulled away from her, grabbed a condom off the dresser, and sat on the side of the bed. She crawled around him and climbed onto his lap, straddling his legs as she lowered herself to his thighs.

The heat of his cock branded her, searing her skin. She could feel him pressing against her pussy. A surge of arousal flooded her, wetting the core of her.

He cupped her face, kissing her. Soft pants heated her face.

"I need you, Kenna. Right now," he whispered.

He wasn't the only one who had second thoughts about today. He was scared for her, and she was just plain frightened.

He lifted her, aligning their bodies, and then, with a groan that was more relief than exertion, he slid inside of her. The perfect blend of pleasure and shock pulled a moan from deep in her throat. She locked her eyes onto him.

He began to move, the rhythm shaking her core.

She clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as she met him thrust for thrust. The slap of skin filled the room, along with heavy breathing.

His hands roamed over every curve and dip. His gentle touch grew more insistent. He cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples until they peaked. She arched her back, begging for more.

The pressure grew, each stroke building her higher until she could feel her orgasm coiling tightly in her lower belly. Kingsley's movements became more urgent as if he could sense her need to come.

He kissed her neck, biting gently at the juncture where it met her shoulder, making her gasp. His teeth scraped against her skin, leaving a trail of fire that sent shivers down her spine.

"Yes," she whispered. "God, yes."

With a growl, he flipped her onto her back, covering her with his weight. That delicious pressure only added to the sensations crashing through her. His hands found her hips. His firm grip aided the unrelenting pace. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her

neck arched as she gave herself over to the feelings filling her.

Their plan for the day faded away, leaving her lost in a cocoon of love, acceptance, and security. Kingsley's breath was hot against her neck. Every exhale caressed her skin, sending shivers through her. She gripped the muscles along his back as he thrust forward.

She chased the pleasure building inside of her. Then it happened. Her body tightened around him. Her muscles clenched.

"King." Her legs locked around him.

Tremors broke through the spell she was under and, like the aftershocks of an earthquake, continued to batter her aroused body.

Kingsley buried himself inside her and grunted his release. She stroked his sides, barely able to raise her elbows off the mattress.

He came down, putting most of his weight on her before kissing her forehead. "Love you, brat."

Her eyes remained closed, and a soft smile played on her lips. "Love you, too."

For a few minutes, peace came over her. A peace only Kingsley could give her.

And then, the plans for the day returned to her like a tidal wave. She sighed before the ache in her chest returned. Kingsley got off her and moved from the bed into the bathroom. She rolled to a sitting position and listened to the shower.

Her thoughts moved to River. What was her sister doing? Had she slept? Was she ready for the trip to the prison?

She got off the bed and joined Kingsley in the shower, taking his spot under the spray of water. The sooner they got ready and left, the sooner they'd get to the prison. The sooner she'd see her dad.

Kenna

The clink of the prison door echoed in the tiny room. Kenna's legs bounced, nearly taking her off the chair she perched on in front of the Plexiglass barrier.

"I feel sick," whispered River.

Kenna grabbed her sister's hand. Her stomach wasn't feeling great either. The clearance and security measures they had to go through to visit with their dad were inhumane and traumatizing.

Kingsley had warned her, but nothing could've prevented the shock at what they'd done. Separated from her sister. Separated from Kingsley. It made the experience even worse.

She couldn't protest when they had her strip her clothes off and bend over in front of the female guard. She couldn't tell them no. She couldn't refuse.

She had to do everything they asked if she wanted to see her dad.

And all she could think about was her dad. If the security measures were awful for her and River, it was a thousand times worse for her dad, knowing that he had to live on death row until the state decided to end his life.

Until today, none of it seemed real.

But the gray, musty-scented walls of the prison beat reality into her.

A rattling within the building grew louder. An oppressive burst of stale air suffocated her. She squeezed River's hand.

They couldn't throw up, cause a scene, or do anything that would shorten their visit.

"Be strong," she whispered, hoping the words made it past her lips.

A guard came into view. Kenna held her breath until stars shot into her vision and she gasped for air.

River scooted closer. Kenna stared through the imperfect glass and caught the moment two guards escorted her dad into the room. He looked like a stranger, and yet that was her dad. His normally clean-shaven face was hidden by a ragged beard. The dark hair her mother used to cut in the kitchen for him was now long and gray. His smooth face was covered with years of wrinkles, hardening his expression and almost hiding his eyes.

Beside her, River sobbed quietly, clinging to Kenna's hand. She stared at her dad, taking in all the changes, trying to find the answers she was scared to know.

She'd read the articles online numerous times. They described him as a murderer. He'd taken four lives. Yet, he'd held her and dried her tears when her mom died. He was the father who beat away the imaginary monsters in her closet and swooped her through the air into her bed so that she wouldn't have to put her feet on the floor.

Dad lowered himself into the chair and put his handcuffed hands on the small platform in front of him without taking his gaze off them. His eyes shifted from left to right, over and over, soaking them in. She could feel that desperation through the glass and in her chest.

The two guards locked his handcuffs to a welded hook in the table, then took the phone receiver off the wall and put it in his hand.

The guard on the right tapped on the glass. Kenna jerked her gaze up.

The man motioned toward the phone on the wall beside her. She grabbed the receiver and nodded, understanding she would communicate with her dad over the phone.

There were no holes in the barrier. They couldn't hear or touch him or feel his breath on their skin.

"Daddy?" she whispered.

Her dad leaned forward because of the chain holding his hands down. His cheek continually twitched, and he closed his eyes.

"I love you." She cleared her throat and repeated, "I love you."

River patted her leg, leaning into her to hear over the phone. She held the receiver between them and pressed her head against her sister's head so they could hear if their father talked.

"I love you, too, Dad." River sniffed.

"You shouldn't be here." Her dad refused to open his eyes. "Forget about me."

The lump in her throat grew, cutting off the air to her lungs. "No. Never. You're our Dad. We want to spend time—"

"Please, Dad. We d-don't care about what happened. That has nothing to do with us. We just want you back in our lives," said River.

He flashed his dark, tormented gaze at them. "I don't want you girls associated with me. I don't need others knowing I've got daughters. You need to go out there and make a life for yourself, away from me."

His voice broke as if from unuse. How long had it been since he had talked to another person?

"No, you can't do that to us." River stiffened beside her. "We've lost mom and you. I lost Kenna. I lost everyone. You have no idea how hard it was to live without you, and now we find out you're alive. You can't push us away. We're family. You have no idea how hard it was to live without my family. If it weren't for Zane, I wouldn't have had anyone."

Kenna could see her dad shutting down. They hadn't come to take out their traumatized childhood on him.

"I knew you were alive." She placed her hand over her heart. "I knew the whole time."

"It doesn't matter." Her dad shook his head. "You're going to lose me again."

"But you're not gone now ." Her fingers ached around the phone receiver. "Don't you want to see us? Don't you want to know how we're doing?"

"Damnit." The chains rattled. "You shouldn't have come."

"Did you miss us at all?" she whispered desperately.

"Every fucking second," he whispered back.

"Then, let us have this time with you." River swiped at her face. "Let's forget

everything that happened. You're our dad. We don't have to talk about the past. We just want to see you and sit with you."

Kenna nodded. "We can come whenever they let us."

"You don't have to be alone," whispered River.

Her dad worked his lips and gruffly said, "I never wanted this for my girls. I tried to protect you."

"We know," they whispered together.

A break in the pained expression came with a mask of indifference she had never seen before on her father's face. "You're both okay?"

"I live with Kingsley." She looked at her sister. "River lives with Zane. We're all in the same house. Together."

Her dad shook his head. "You were so young. I didn't know what to do."

This was what she wanted. What happened in the past was no longer important. That was between her dad and the state. All she wanted was to share her life with her dad and remember the love she once received from him.

Until coming to prison, she had no idea how important it was that she got to tell him that she loved Kingsley and that he was her future.

Her dad looked at River. "You're happy?"

"I'm loved, and I love living in Gem Haven." River paused. "Have you ever been there?"

"Once, a long time ago."

River started crying again. Kenna straightened her neck. There was so much she didn't know about her dad. She had a child's remembrance of her parents and wanted to get to know her dad as an adult before it was too late.

Today could be the last time she gets to see him, and everything she'd wanted to tell him would be lost. Panic set in.

"Is mom buried in St. Maries?" she asked.

There was no funeral. No time to mourn or question or miss her before she was informed her dad had died and she was ripped out of the house. She needed to see where her mom rested. She needed to see that someone had taken care of her mom.

Her dad bowed his head. No longer able to hold the phone in her aching hand, she passed River the receiver to hold between them. She had no idea what she'd do if he kept the information to himself.

"There's a package. Find it." He lifted his troubled gaze. "All the answers you need are in there." He cleared his throat. "You need to forget about me."

"I want to come back," said Kenna. "I want to be here until the end."

"I'm trying to protect—"

"We don't need protection," River continually wiped her cheeks. We just need you. We love you."

"Pooksie." Her dad gazed at River and then her. "Precious."

At the mention of their childhood nicknames, she swallowed repeatedly. The guard beside their dad picked up his phone and spoke. Her dad glanced over at him. They couldn't hear what was said but could see the tension set into their dad's shoulders.

He swung a desperate gaze at them. "Listen to me carefully."

She and River scooted closer as if that would help them hear him better. River held the phone between them. Their heads pressed almost painfully together, trying to get as close to the receiver as possible.

"In the packet, there's a key. It goes to a safe deposit box at Bancock Bank in St. Mar—"

The guard ripped the phone out of his hand, hanging up on them. Kenna cried out at the sudden silence, standing up in the chair.

"No, it's too soon. We had a half hour." She banged on the Plexiglass. "Daddy."

Her dad stared into her eyes. Her heart raced. River held on to her arm, pulling her away from the barrier. It wasn't fear or anger coming from him, but regret.

The two guards returned, making quick work of unlocking the handcuffs from the table and lifting her dad to his feet.

As they dragged her dad away from the Plexiglass, he shouted, "I'm sorry."

That violent admission broke her heart. She grabbed River, shaking from deep in her soul. The visit was less than she expected and yet so much more. She couldn't grasp everything that was said. All she knew was that she'd seen her dad.

"He's alive," she whispered.

River sobbed. "He left us something."

They both clung desperately to the littlest things. All they'd wanted was to sit with their dad. To feel his love. To remember.

She looked away from the vacant side of the room when the door opened behind them. A guard motioned for them to exit. Pulling River with her, she couldn't get out of the prison fast enough.

Kingsley was outside, waiting for her. She needed to see him. Touch him. Talk to him.

Kingsley

The grasshoppers chirped, only going silent when a motorcycle revved to life at the clubhouse at the top of the hill. Kingsley held on to Kenna, even though his legs had gone numb several minutes ago.

Sitting on the ground, his legs spread out so she could sit between them, he rubbed her bare arms to keep the night chill off her skin.

"I wish it was morning." She yawned.

After returning from the prison, the girls came home determined to hunt for some package their dad had left them. Because of the late hour, he'd insisted that they try and eat something and then relax. Today had taken its toll on them.

"Until we know where to start, there's no use running around wild and wasting time." He kissed the top of her head.

He and Zane knew where to start. But there was nothing they could do tonight. They needed to talk to their dad. Ridge Stafford was the link between Burt Shay and his daughters, and Kingsley had a feeling his dad knew where to find the mysterious package left to River and Kenna.

She yawned again and laid her head on the front of his chest. He held her tighter.

"We should go inside and go to bed," he whispered.

"I don't want to close my eyes."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll see my dad's face and I..." She shivered. "He looked so different."

Death Row would change anyone, but Kenna hadn't seen her dad in ten years. He'd gone through a lot—it aged a man. He'd seen the same thing happen to his dad.

"I'm not like River," she mumbled.

River had fallen asleep in Kenna's car on the way back to Gem Haven, which he'd driven down to southern Idaho for the visit so they could all go together. She'd cried until exhaustion hit. Zane had carried her into the house, fast asleep.

Kenna hadn't shed a tear. She'd jumped into trying to figure out the mystery behind the package, more determined to keep in contact with her dad in whatever way possible. All her talking had only added more stress to her life.

"I never asked him if he was guilty," she whispered.

He stilled, knowing she'd never voiced her thoughts on her father's crimes. She remained her dad's biggest supporter, believing in him when River so easily believed the story that Tom Pruitt aka Burt Shay was dead.

"I don't want to know anymore." She turned and faced him. "Is that bad?"

"Nah." He kissed her forehead. "He owns his crimes. They're not yours. There's no use punishing yourself for something he may have or may not have done."

She lowered her chin to her chest. "I just wish I knew what changed. How did we go from being a family with two parents that loved us to living the most traumatic, secretive life I could ever imagine?"

"Life's hard. People change." He sighed.

She snapped her gaze to him. "Have I been good enough for you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Since the day you introduced yourself to me and promised to make sure I was protected and safe, our relationship has revolved around me." She blew out her lips. "I led you across states—"

"Stop."

"I'm serious." She pushed to her feet. "You brought me here, and I've been so set on finding my dad and talking to him that I haven't given you enough attention."

"I don't need attention."

She scoffed. "You found out your mom lives on the other side of the mountain in a cabin and has been there for most of your life—you missed out on having a mom. Tell me how that's different from having a mom die? I should've helped you—"

"There's nothing to help with. It is what it is." He shifted to stand up, and pins and needles stabbed his feet as blood rushed into his legs. "Fucking hell."

"What's wrong?" She kneeled down beside him. "Is it your chest?"

He groaned, trying not to move until he got more feeling back in his feet. "What?"

"Are you having chest pain?" She put her hand on his stomach.

He'd almost laugh if his feet weren't hurting. "I'm not dying."

"You never know." She frowned. "You're old. Older."

"Brat," he muttered.

"Seriously. What's wrong?"

"Sat too long on the ground, my feet are asleep." He got to his knees and pushed up to his full height. "Fuck."

A soft snicker mingled with the crickets. He shot a look at Kenna. She'd covered her mouth to stifle her amusement, but her eyes twinkled in the light coming off the back of the house.

He took a step toward her. Pain prickled his foot. He grabbed his leg, groaning in discomfort. She came to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He picked his right foot off the ground. Relief flowed up his leg. Any small movement made his nerves tingle like a thousand red ants crawling up his ankle to his calf.

He looped his arms over her shoulders, holding her in place. "Stay still."

"Better?" she asked.

"As long as I don't move." He let his head fall back and looked up into the star-speckled sky. "It's been a long day."

"Mm-hm." She pressed against him. "I don't think we thanked you and Zane for taking us to see Dad. We appreciate all you've done for us—before we came here and

after. I don't know what I'd do without you in my life."

He didn't want her thanks. If not for his dad, he wouldn't be in the spot of lying to Kenna throughout the years and pretending her father was dead. If it were up to him, he would've told her the truth and let her deal with everything as it came to her instead of unloading the reality of her life onto her all at once.

"Let's go in and go to bed." He limped a dozen steps until the blood returned to his feet. "We need our sleep. You never know what will happen tomorrow in Gem Haven."

She smacked his ass. "Don't say that."

He chuckled. "Don't worry. You'll get used to the excitement around here."

He grabbed her hand, leading her upstairs. If he could, he'd change everything for Kenna. But this was his life. He couldn't think of a better one.

He had a woman he loved.

A club that surrounded him.

And he lived in the most beautiful place on earth.

Kenna

River slid a paper across the table. Kenna pulled a piece of tape off the dispenser and added the note to the other clues. While they'd remembered all they could from their childhood, none of the places they thought would have a package had come to fruition.

The old house they'd last lived in with their parents was now owned by someone else and remodeled. Zane and River had rode over and checked it out, making sure their father hadn't left something there for them. But with new occupants and an intensive remodel, they checked their old house off the list of possible places to find the package.

"We checked the warehouse where Dad used to work. It's now a storage place for the heating and ducting company next door." River tapped her finger on a piece of paper. "We also checked off that park Mom and Dad always took us to—that was a long shot. It's a public place. If anything was left a decade ago, someone would've found it or a groundskeeper would've thrown it away." Her sister crossed her arms. "What about Ronald?"

The man who used to work with her dad and had initially set the idea in her head that Dad wasn't dead was her first guess on who would have the package. She shook her head. "He died two years ago. I found his obituary in the St. Maries paper after searching for every Ronald who lived there. Surprisingly enough, only three would be around his age. His full name was Ronald Kewsky."

River sighed. "That's sad."

"You know what else is sad?" Kenna sighed. "We went to the stables where Mom and Dad had Luxy stabled in the off chance they had records of where Luxy had gone. There was no sign of there ever being acreage or horses there. It's now a huge apartment complex. I didn't even recognize the area."

"I haven't thought of your horse in a long time," whispered River.

"You know, Kingsley tried to find Luxy for me after we went into foster care. He was told the horse had been sold at auction." She swallowed and whispered, "In my head, I keep hoping that some little girl got the horse and not—"

"That's what happened." River nodded. "You have to believe."

"I try." Kenna planted her hands on her hips. "I don't know where else to look. I feel like we didn't know enough about Dad's life to even make a wild guess where he would hide a package."

From the kitchen, Zane said, "Our dad's supposed to call today. He might have an idea on where we can look, considering he's somehow mixed into your dad's business."

"If he'll even tell us." Kingsley set his bottle of water on the counter. "It'll depend on if Dad woke up wanting to be an asshole today or not."

"Truth," muttered Zane.

River sat in the chair and cupped her chin. Kenna rubbed the back of their neck. They'd not only looked for the package over the last week, but she and River had also continued to work. But they weren't the only ones running on empty.

Kingsley and Zane had barely slept.

Whenever they had downtime, someone from the clubhouse, bar, or campground called. They were needed to keep Gem Haven running.

A knock filled the silence. Zane left the room. She reached for Kingsley, linking her fingers with his, needing that connection. Starting tonight, she would pamper him to show how much she appreciated all his help.

Kingsley always supported her no matter how wild an idea she had or how irrational she became over the last week.

The thump of boots and soft conversation infiltrated the dining room. She turned and found Zane leading Zora to them.

In Zora's arms was a basket of flowers. She stepped over and gave Kingsley's mom a hug, having not seen her since the day she had hurt herself.

"You're walking." She smiled. "How's your ankle feeling?"

"Much better." Zora looked down at her foot. "The swelling is gone and once the bruising is done changing colors, I won't even know I twisted it."

"Here, sit down." She stepped over and pulled out a chair. "Did you walk all the way over here?"

"No. Big John gave me a ride." Zora held out the basket. "I didn't get a chance to give you flowers last time, so I wanted to drop these off. I cut them this morning. If you put them in water, they should last a good while."

She looked toward Kingsley. "Do you have a vase?"

"I doubt it." He walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinets.

Zora leaned to the side. "Check above the fridge."

Kingsley looked back at his mom and then followed her instructions. Several large vases were stored in the cabinet above the fridge. Kenna glanced at River, not wanting to say anything but needing to know if she was the only one who found it strange that their mother lived in a cabin instead of in the house.

It was a huge house with plenty of room for everyone.

Her sister raised her brows. She too thought it was strange that Zora knew where the vases were located. Maybe at one time, they belonged to her.

Kingsley filled up the vase with water and set it on the island. Zora put the basket on the counter and began to arrange the cut flowers.

"Once I'm done, I'll get out of your way." Zora smiled tenderly.

"There's no rush." She leaned forward and smelled a bloom. "These are beautiful. They smell wonderful."

Zora ducked her chin but couldn't hide the smile of pleasure. She was obviously proud of the way she could grow flowers.

"Okay, so Dad mentioned that we'd find a key in the package that goes to the bank." River leaned back in the chair.

"It wouldn't be to the bank." Zane stepped behind River. "It'll probably go to a safety deposit box."

"What's that?" Kenna turned around.

"You don't know what a safety deposit box is?" asked Kingsley.

She scoffed. "Don't make it sound like I'm an idiot. When in my life would I have found that out? I don't even have a bank account."

"Not making fun of you." Kingsley kissed her, softening his words. "Banks have safes in the back, in a little room, that customers can rent. They're given a key." Kingsley leaned against the kitchen island. "Those with the key can open the safe whenever they want."

"It takes two keys," said Zora.

Kenna grinned at Kingsley, knowing she wasn't the only one who didn't know exactly how bank safes worked.

"Are you sure it takes two keys? Kenna's dad only mentioned one key," said Kingsley.

"I'm positive." Zora delicately slid the stem of a flower into the vase. "The owner of the safety deposit box receives one key, but to open the box, it also takes the master key from the bank. Once both keys are in place, the box slides out of the vault. They allow you to go inside a little booth with a curtain behind you for privacy to go through the contents of the safe."

"How do you know that?" Zane stepped closer.

"Because I have a safety deposit box." Zora eyed the flowers, changing where two of the blossoms were set, and continued putting the rest of the stems in water. "There was a time when I needed somewhere safe to store some of my papers while I was

away from Gem Haven."

Zane frowned. "But, we have a safe—"

"You're a lot like your father." Zora's warm smile took the sting out of the comparison. "But I wanted somewhere that only I could get into. I think it's important to have that security."

There was so much Zora wasn't saying that all Kenna could do was watch the conversation taking place around her. The Stafford men seemed lost—and that wasn't something she'd ever seen before. Normally, they knew when someone sneezed in Gem Haven.

Zora turned from the flowers and met Kenna's gaze. "Enjoy the flowers."

"We all will." She leaned against Kingsley. "Thank you."

Zora limped past her. Kingsley stiffened, and Kenna looked up at him, only to have his total focus on his mom.

"Zora?" said Kingsley.

Kenna noticed that he never called her mom. That was probably to be expected, considering he hadn't grown up with her and believed she had stayed away on purpose.

"Hm?" Zora turned around.

"Dad wouldn't have given you anything to put in that safety deposit box, would he?" Kingsley's hand on Kenna's nape tightened. "Maybe a decade ago?"

Zora's brows pinched together. "Not that I recall."

Zane moved toward his mom. "I'll walk you out."

Instead of going, Zora met Kingsley's gaze. "Big John is the only one who asked me to put an envelope in the box."

River gasped. Kenna gripped the back of Kingsley's leather vest.

Zane met Kingsley's gaze and nodded. "I'll get Big John and bring him to the house."

As soon as the door shut, she turned to Kingsley. "What's with all the questions? What are you thinking?"

"Do you think somehow our dad gave a package to your mom?" River rounded the table and came to Kenna's side. "That's crazy."

"Let's just wait." Kingsley kissed her forehead, bringing her to his chest, and wrapping his arms around her. "We might as well check every avenue."

She pressed her cheek to his chest. As much as she wanted to stay and find out what was going on, she had to get ready to go to the bar. Her shift started in an hour.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kenna

On the back of Kingsley's motorcycle, Kenna looked at River riding behind Zane. While they had ridden many times, they had never ridden together.

The ride today could change everything.

Her mind wandered back to Kingsley's conversation with her after meeting with Big John. He was sure the package Big John had put in Zora's safety deposit box had belonged to Ridge Stafford.

It was so wild and crazy to believe the package from her dad could possibly have passed through so many hands. But here they were, riding to find answers because Zora had no idea what was in the package, even though she owned the safety deposit box.

The wind whipped past her as they weaved through the winding mountain roads into the valley, following the river into St. Maries.

Her dad's mysterious package, the key, and the answers all felt like pieces of a puzzle she couldn't quite fit together.

Riding down the main street, Kingsley pulled into the bank parking lot. She looked around, finding Big John in the truck with Zora. The only way they could open the box was if Zora was here.

According to Big John, taking her off the mountain was challenging. Sometimes, stress would make her stop taking her medicine. He and Zane agreed it would be best if they watched her afterward to make sure she stayed medicated.

This wasn't something Zora asked for. They needed her to do them a favor. In return, they would make sure nothing happens to her.

Kingsley shut off the motorcycle. She slid off and stood beside the Harley.

"You'll stay out here with River." He nodded over her head. "Big John is right there, watching out for you."

"Okay." She kissed him quickly. "Good luck."

"We'll need more than luck." He swung his leg off the bike and turned to Zane. "Ready?"

"Yep."

River walked around the Harley and stood with her. Together, they watched the men get Zora out of the truck, talk with her, and lead her inside.

Her stomach rolled. "I feel bad having Zora come. She's not comfortable being off Gem Haven."

"I know, but there was no other way. Big John told us that Zora's name was the only one on the account, so she had to sign a piece of paper to go inside the safety deposit room and use her key. But because she rents the box, she can take whoever she wants with her." River chewed on her bottom lip. "We'll make it up to her. Maybe have pizza at the house so she can be around Zane and Kingsley more. She seems to enjoy being around her sons."

Kenna gasped. "Oh, no."

"What?"

"Zora has to sign in to use her key."

"Yeah, that's what I said." River frowned. "That's why we brought her."

She turned to her sister. "If there's a package in there from our dad and a key is included, we still can't use it without Dad's signature."

"Shit," muttered River.

Kenna exhaled heavily. "It's probably asking too much for someone to impersonate Dad and forge his signature."

River rubbed her stomach. "Let's just get today over with and deal with what comes next before we think up any more problems. The package that Big John and Zora remember might be something from Zane and Kingsley's dad, not ours. We're worrying about nothing."

A car door slammed. She turned and found Big John getting out of the truck and lighting a cigarette.

"I wonder how long it'll take." River paced.

"There're not many cars here, so it shouldn't take too long."

"Just think, at one time, we lived three streets over." She pointed in the opposite direction. "We went to that store with Mom all the time."

"Remember all the makeup she used to buy?" River laughed softly. "She'd stand in the aisle looking at all the shades of eyeshadow and holding them up to her face."

"And we'd always get a new color of nail polish." Her eyes burned.

She could get lost in all the good times in St. Maries. Her parents loved her and River. More importantly, her parents loved each other. A love like no other until her mom was killed.

She wanted a life with Kingsley. A good life. A loving life.

Her life was in Gem Haven now, not St. Maries. There was nothing here for her. River, Kingsley, and even Zane and Zora were the only ones who mattered to her.

"They're coming." River grabbed Kenna's hand. "Kingsley's carrying something."

"Oh, my God. Did we figure it out?" She surged forward and met Kingsley halfway to his Motorcycle. "Did you find it?"

"Yeah." He looped his arm around her shoulders.

"Open it."

"We won't do anything until we get back home." He stopped by his Harley and put the package—which turned out to be a Manilla envelope—in his duffle.

She turned around to tell River, but her sister was with Zane beside the truck, talking to Zora. "Is your mom okay?"

"I think so." Kingsley sat on the motorcycle. "We'll have Big John take her straight back to the cabin. She's comfortable there and she does better when Big John is

helping her."

Zane and River walked toward them, hand in hand. She climbed behind Kingsley and put her feet on the pegs.

Kingsley's hand went to her calf and squeezed. "We're not going straight home."

"Why not?" She was anxious to open the package and find out what her dad had left behind for them.

"When we opened the envelope, there was a receipt on the top of the pile of papers. Your mom's ashes are placed in a memorial wall at St. Joe's Cemetery." He rubbed her leg. "About two miles away."

"We thought you and River would like to visit your mom, " Zane added.

River met her gaze. Kenna's throat closed. For a moment, she wanted to tell them no. She wanted to remain clueless because then she wouldn't have to face the pain that she'd already lived through.

But, it was her mom.

She missed her more than she'd ever be able to verbalize. There was a hole in her heart that would always ache when she thought of her mother.

"Okay." She nodded at River.

They needed to see where her ashes were placed. They needed to say goodbye—something they should've been allowed to do when they were eleven and twelve years old.

She wrapped her arms around Kingsley and pressed tightly against his back. There were too many changes. Too many information bombs. Too many emotions beating inside her.

It took no time to get to the cemetery. The area was familiar to her, and yet she never set foot in the place before.

Gravesites were uniformly spread out over the area, but Kingsley rolled through the middle of the cemetery, beyond a small white building that looked like an old church, and stopped near a concrete wall.

River jumped off Zane's motorcycle and rushed to her. "Dad had her cremated?"

"I guess so." She frowned at the wall.

The surface was covered by small squares, row after row, at least ten deep and fifty long. Each square had a name and birth/death dates.

"I always imagined she was buried somewhere," mumbled River. "This is weird."

The heaviness in Kenna's chest increased. She, too, always imagined her mom in a casket. It physically hurt that the truth was different than what she was led to believe.

There was no funeral, no flowers, no goodbyes.

Kingsley took her hand and led her to the wall. She read names, holding her breath. Even though she wanted to find where her mom was laid to rest, she held out hope that she wasn't here. That her dad hadn't put her inside a slim wall and forgot about her.

"I don't see anything." River walked around the structure. "There's more names on

this side."

Kenna followed her sister, barely reading the names. Some of the squares had flowers stuck inside a hole under the nameplate. Some of them wilted and dried like forgotten promises.

River dropped to her knees. "I think this is her."

Kenna stepped closer and read. "Louanne Carpenter?"

"The date's correct." River rubbed the pad of her thumb over the name, wiping the dust off the front. "But once again, one of our parents has a different last name than us."

"That's why we couldn't find any information about her death," muttered Kenna.

"Carpenter?" said Zane. "Are you sure?"

"It says it right here. The dates for the birth and death are right." Kenna swallowed. "There's less than three thousand people who live here. It has to be her."

"Hell," mumbled Kingsley.

Straightening, she looked at Kingsley and then Zane. "What's wrong?"

Kingsley scratched his beard. "I think we just found out why my dad owed your dad a favor."

"What do you mean?" She turned away from the memorial wall.

He cupped her face and kissed her. "We'll talk more when we get home. Take this

time with your sister and see where your mom rests."

Kingsley walked back to the Harley and lit a cigarette. Zane joined him, leaving River with her. She tried to figure out what the men meant.

"Does the name Carpenter sound familiar to you?" asked Kenna.

"Nope." River sighed. "Yet, we're supposed to believe our last name is Pruitt. This whole mess doesn't make sense."

She turned around and kneeled on the ground, reading her mother's name again. She'd lived half her life without her mom, yet it seemed like yesterday.

"Maybe next time, we can bring some of Zora's flowers and put them under her name." She trailed her finger over the engraved cursive.

River leaned against Kenna's side. "I'm glad she's somewhere permanent."

"Yeah," she whispered.

Knowing what it felt like to be shuffled from one home to another home through the foster care system, she was glad her mom's ashes were placed in the memorial wall for safe keeping.

Going by the dates, her mom died at thirty years old. She was so young. Barely eighteen years old when she had Kenna.

"We'll visit again." River inhaled deeply.

Kenna stood and hugged River. "Are you okay?"

River squeezed her. "It feels kind of good, you know?"

"Yeah," she whispered.

Their dad had taken care of their mom even after her death. She looked at the wall once more and then walked toward Kingsley.

Kingsley

Zane stormed into the clubhouse. Kingsley followed, ignoring the men partying. The girls were anxious to dive into the package their father left, but before they lost themselves in new information, they needed to find out one important clue.

Kingsley headed straight to the office. He hated leaving Kenna at the house, but she'd fallen asleep on the bed while he'd showered. Likewise, Zane informed him that River had fallen asleep on the couch in the rec room.

If Zane could find what he was looking for, Kingsley could get back to Kenna before she woke up.

He shut the door, cutting off the music and the noise.

Zane sat in the chair and unlocked the drawer to his right. Kingsley walked over and looked at the pictures. They went back to before he and Zane were born.

"I got it." Zane slapped a folder on the desk. "I've spent so much time pouring over Dad's old records, I knew I'd seen it."

Since their dad went to prison, he'd let Zane run the club. While Zane dove in headfirst, Kingsley had spent most of his time trying to find Kenna the last two years.

"Take a look." Zane slid a piece of paper across the desk.

Kingsley read.

As a favor to Big John, I took his sister, Lou Carpenter, to the only place where she'd be safe. Burt Shay could take her in, get her a new identity, and protect her from Valdones Motorcycle Club. If Big John doesn't make it out alive, his sister will be taken care of. There is no payment for the service. Big John is a member of Gem Haven Motorcycle Club.

"Jesus." He looked up. "Why not tell Big John where his sister was located once it was safe?"

"Because..." Zane took another paper from the file. "It'll never be safe. Take a look."

Kingsley scanned the paper, shaking his head. "Did you know this?"

Zane nodded. "Only because I've read every paper Dad had squirreled away in the office.

According to the records, Dad recruited Big John away from Valdones a year after he'd started the motorcycle club. Nobody left Valdones alive.

"If I remember right, Big John was in prison after Dad went to war with Valdones and didn't get out until..." Zane grabbed another file and opened it, shuffling through the papers. "He got out two years before Dad went to prison." He met Kingsley's gaze. "The same year Louanne Carpenter was killed."

He planted his hands on the desk. "We have to tell the girls."

"Agreed. But not tonight. It's late." Zane put the papers back in the files and locked the drawer. "We'll let them sleep."

"What about Big John?"

"I'll let him know tomorrow when we tell River and Kenna, " Zane said, rising from his desk.

Kingsley crossed his arms. Big John was Kenna and River's only relative—the only relative not sitting on Death Row.

Secrets run deep in Gem Haven.

Kenna

The mattress compressed and Kingsley rolled. Kenna threw her arm and leg over him, keeping him in bed.

"Gem Haven doesn't run itself." He kissed her. "It's noon."

Shocked at the time, she sat up and threw off the blanket. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She was due to work at the bar at three o'clock. It was bad enough that she took off yesterday to go to St. Maries.

"You needed to sleep." He tagged her wrist, stopping her from going into the bathroom. "Besides, you're not working today."

"Yes, I am."

"We're having Taylor work your shift," he said.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Something was going on.

"Am I fired?"

Kingsley's brows lowered. "No."

"Then, why can't I work today?"

"I thought you wanted to go through your dad's package with River." He slipped a black T-shirt over his head. "Zane's coming down from the clubhouse at one o'clock."

How had she forgotten? Everything that had happened yesterday rushed to the forefront.

"I'm almost afraid of finding out what's in there." She snaked her arms around him. "So much has happened. I'm afraid of what else we'll discover."

"It'll be okay." He kissed her. "Nothing changes between us. You've got your sister. This is your home."

"Forever?"

"Damn straight." He patted her ass. "Get dressed. Take a shower. Do whatever you gotta do. I'm going downstairs and getting a pot of coffee going. Do you want something to eat?"

"No." She pressed her hand to her stomach. "I can't eat now."

Alone in the bedroom, she picked out her clothes and then showered. Once she was done, she dressed and dried her hair.

She checked the time. It was almost one o'clock.

Nausea hit her. Maybe she should eat something.

Downstairs, she walked into the kitchen and found River standing around the island with Kingsley. Both of them were quiet.

"Hey." She checked to make sure her sister was okay.

Neither one of them knew what today would bring. She was starting to wish for just one day of normalcy.

"Morning." River's voice failed to hide her anxiety.

Kingsley held out a cup of coffee for her. Though the last thing she wanted was something on her stomach, she took the drink. Maybe it would calm her nerves.

"I just told River that whatever happens today, we face it together." He kissed her forehead. "Just like we always have, right?"

"Mm." She inhaled, drawing strength from having him beside her.

The door at the front of the house opened and shut. Kenna stepped closer to Kingsley. He put his hand on her back, drawing light circles. Whatever was in the envelope from her dad couldn't be worse than learning he sat on death row.

Zane walked into the room, followed by Big John. "Sweetheart?"

"Right here." River stepped over to him.

"Can you get Big John a coffee?"

"Sure."

Zane moved to the table. Kingsley led Kenna into the attached dining room. She waited for someone to tell her why Big John was there.

They were all meeting to go through the envelope. It was an emotional and private

matter.

River brought Big John and Zane coffee and then sat at the table her and Kingsley.

"Go ahead and sit down." Kingsley motioned for Big John to sit on the other side of the table.

The vice president was older than Kingsley—she guessed around fifty years old. He never talked much around her, but she was used to him popping in at the house to give messages to Kingsley or when he was looking for Zane.

"I'm sure River and Kenna are wondering why we've invited Big John to the house today." Zane looked around the table. "I'll get to that before we go through the envelope."

"Do you want us to give you some privacy?" River said, "We can come back when you're through."

"This isn't club business, sweetheart." Zane leaned back in the chair. "It has to do with you and Kenna."

Kingsley put his hand on her thigh underneath the table. At that point she was more confused than ever. Why was Kingsley trying to protect her?

Zane put his hand on the envelope without opening it. "At the cemetery yesterday, it came to our attention that River and Kenna's mom had a different last name than they remembered. Considering their dad also had an alias, it was no surprise that the deeper we got into their past, this would happen again. However, to have someone buried in a privately owned cemetery, they must be buried under their real name. The name they were born with or, if they were married, their spouse's last name."

Kenna frowned at Kingsley. Couldn't he get his brother to jump to the point? They already knew about the change of names.

"I left the cemetery, remembering something I read in one of my dad's files." Zane looked at Big John. "That's why you're here. When you patched in with Gem Haven Motorcycle Club, Ridge Stafford did you a favor."

Big John's expression never changed. He never moved. He never broke eye contact with Zane.

Kenna grabbed Kingsley's hand. The vice president was freaking scary as he controlled his reaction. She had no idea what Big John had to do with her and River, but something significant was happening.

"Don't." Big John sat forward. "We'll have this conversation in private at the clubhouse."

Zane put his hand on the back of River's neck, met Big John's gaze, and continued. "We'll have the conversation here. As a favor to you, Dad took your sister and put her in the equivalent of the Witness Protection Program because of the danger surrounding you at the time. Dad gave your sister to Tom Pruitt AKA Burt Shay, who changed her identity—"

"No more." Big John rose from the chair to his full height of six foot four inches. Not to be intimidated, Zane got to his feet, blocking his vice president from harming anyone at the table.

Kenna clung to Kingsley, enthralled in the story once her dad's name came into play.

"Pruitt kept her safe while you were in prison." Zane lowered his voice. "As promised, he stripped her identity and gave her a new name so that even you couldn't

find her once you walked out of prison. But that's not all Pruitt gave your sister. He gave her love and two daughters."

River gasped. Kenna's heart pounded. She couldn't breathe.

Big John landed in the chair, planting his hands on the table. His wild gaze locked on Zane.

"Louanne Carpenter became Lou Pruitt, mother of Kenna and River Pruitt. She married Burt Shay AKA Tom Pruitt in a spiritual wedding not recognized by the state." Zane paused. "Unfortunately, she was killed outside a gas station nine years—"

"Ten," whispered Kenna, staring at Big John. "You're my mom's brother?"

"Louanne—" He blew out his kept breath. "She was my sister."

She turned to River. Tears rolled down her sister's face. Shocked at the new information, she couldn't wrap her head around having a living relative. A living relative she had no idea existed until today.

Big John studied her, studied River, and cleared his throat. "Was she happy?"

Kenna nodded emphatically. "Dad loved her, and she loved Dad and us."

The air came out of Big John, and he cradled his head in disbelief. "How did my sister's kids get to Gem Haven? Are they in danger?"

"Not from Valdones." Zane put his hand on his vice president's shoulder. "You can thank Dad for that." He sat back down. "To catch you up, River and Kenna's dad's sitting on death row. It appears as if Burt Shay asked Dad for a returned favor. He

wanted us to watch over his daughters and keep them safe. Kingsley and I have known the girls since they were eleven and twelve years old and being shuffled from foster home to foster home."

"Jesus," muttered Big John, wiping his hand over his jaw.

The muscles in her legs twitched. She bit her lip. On information overload, she couldn't process having an uncle in the same room. She wasn't ready to have her life story told again. She wanted to put it in the past.

Kingsley squeezed her thigh. "Let's all take a break."

The pent-up air inside her came out in a forceful exhale, and she stood, rushing into the kitchen. Under the guise of getting a drink of water, she panted, trying to steady her racing heart.

Kingsley put his hands on her hips and leaned against her back. "Are you okay?"

"No."

He kissed her temple. "Zane and I figured it out last night when you were sleeping. We weren't trying to keep it from you—"

"It's not that." She swallowed. "I don't even know who I am anymore."

"Kenna Pruitt." He turned her around. "Some day when you're ready, you'll be Kenna Stafford, and that's a name that will belong to you for the rest of your life."

Her breath shuddered. "You're not helping me relax."

He kissed her softly. "You've got an uncle. Your family is growing."

She looked into the dining room. Big John stood at the window, looking out into the backyard, closing himself off from everyone. His shoulders were stiff, and his hands were shoved deep in his front pockets. Her chest tightened. She had ten years to accept the loss of her mother. Big John just found out his sister had died. Not only died but murdered.

He continued to look out the window, lost in his head—a familiar place she went to that helped keep her from falling apart.

She looked into Kingsley's eyes. "I'll be right back."

Escaping the tension in the room, she ran upstairs. In the bedroom, she dropped to her knees beside the bed and pulled out her stack of sketchbooks. She searched for the one she'd had when her parents died.

Grabbing the beaten-up book with the faded cover that had traveled from home to home with her. She thumbed through the pages, almost blind to the drawings she'd seen so many times they were permanently etched in her mind.

She found the one she sought and carefully ripped it from the binding. Taking the sketch downstairs with her, she approached Big John. He continued to look out the window, oblivious to her standing beside him.

There was nothing she could say to soften the truth.

Placing her hand on his arm, she waited until he looked toward her and offered him her drawing. "This is what Mom looked like the day before we lost her. Dad had brought roses home to give to her, and this is what she looked like after he was done kissing her. It's what I see every time I think of her because she was at her happiest."

The paper shook in his hand. He exhaled through pursed lips, staring at the drawing.

She whispered, "You can have that."

Stepping away, she gave him privacy so he could see his sister in a way he hadn't before—a grown woman with a family and a husband who had loved her.

Kenna

The food Zane had brought over from the bar sat uneaten on the table. Kenna took her spot between River and Kingsley. Big John sat across from her. At times, she'd catch him staring at her or River, probably trying to see something in them that would make the news easier to accept that he was an uncle to two grown women.

Zane opened the envelope and pulled out a stack of papers. As he glanced at one paper, he passed it to River, who passed it to Kenna. She, in turn, gave it to Kingsley, who handed it to Big John.

The receipt for cremating her mom and the deed to the spot on the memorial wall at the cemetery were the first things they dealt with.

"There's a death certificate with her legal name." Zane thumbed through more papers. "These look like pages out of an accountant's book. Possibly a money trail."

"Would he even have money?" asked River.

"Considering what he did for a living, I imagine he had a lot of money. But we have no record of anything yet. It all could've disappeared." Zane passed around a piece of paper. "Here's your father's birth certificate—the real one."

"Where did the name Pruitt come from?" Kenna gave Kingsley the evidence.

"I imagine it's an alias." Zane frowned, reading a paper. "You were both born at home. A home birth."

"There's the loophole." Kingsley rubbed his chin. "No hospital. No government involvement. He gave you names that weren't linked to either your mom or dad."

"Is that even legal?" asked River.

"No," answered Zane, Kingsley, and Big John together.

Kingsley rubbed her back. "Legal or not, you are officially Kenna Jade Pruitt. For now."

"It looks like everything else backs up their existence. School records. Immunization records. Dental records." Zane set a stack of papers to the side and frowned at the next paper as he read it.

Kenna inhaled deeply. It was hard not to get overwhelmed.

She struggled to understand the difference between the fictional life that was created for her and the reality that she knew. No amount of paperwork could tell her that her memories were a figment of her imagination.

"Sweetheart?" Zane palmed River's nape. "Can you handle a bit more?"

Her sister nodded.

Zane looked at Kenna. "Are you good? There's more."

"I want to hear it." She leaned forward.

"It's a letter from Burt Shay to both of you."

"Read it," said River and Kenna together.

Zane read.

"To my daughters,

If you're reading this, please know I have avenged your mother's death by killing those who killed her. If that makes me a monster, so be it. I do not regret what I have done. Lou was the love of my life. Without her, I am nothing.

Kenna, my precious girl. River, my pooksie. Forgive me."

Sometime while Zane read the letter, Kenna had covered her mouth. River buried her face in her hands. The room fell silent.

She no longer wondered if her dad was innocent or if the judge had made a terrible mistake. His confession was right there for all to see.

Yet, he was still her dad. She still loved him. Nothing, and no one, would ever stop her from loving him.

Zane cleared his throat. "There's more."

"I've included a key to a safety deposit box that has been paid for fifty years. There are three people who can open it—myself, Kenna, and River. Inside, you will find the money from the printouts and proof that Mitch Bellow, Roy Fine, Aaron Dixon, and Shaun DeFrees were responsible for killing your mother in the chance that I fail to kill them myself."

Her pulse roared in her head. She could barely follow along.

"Is that all?" Kenna held on to the edge of the table.

Zane dipped his chin. "That's everything in the envelope."

Kenna rushed from the table.

"Kenna?" said Kingsley.

She exited the room, opened the front door, and escaped the house. Escaped the truth. Escaped the pain.

Fleeing from the hurt, she stumbled over the uneven ground as she headed toward the trees. She needed to outrun the ache building in her chest, trying to squeeze the life out of her.

Her lungs seized. Black dots filled the edges of her vision.

Unable to go any further, she dropped to her knees. Her nails dug into the dirt, wanting to shake some sense into the world. Nothing she knew was real.

She was losing everyone again. Each time became more unbearable. She never asked for any of this.

Warm, strong arms wrapped around her from behind. "Sh, I've got you."

Sobs strangled her. She panicked. The air stuck in her throat.

She tried to pull away, but the embrace tightened, refusing to let her go. "Breathe, Kenna. Just Breathe," the deep voice continued, soft and soothing.

Gasping for air, she let the warmth seep into her, dissolving the walls around her. Gradually, her sobs turned to quiet sniffles. The black dots began to fade, and the world slowly came back into focus.

And the pain returned. The unrelenting sorrow that clung to her since she was a child squeezed down on her, making her hurt.

She turned slightly, recognizing the familiar scent of sandalwood and pine. It was Kingsley, always there when she needed him most.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispered, her voice hoarse from crying. "It hurts too much."

"We'll get through this." Kingsley kissed her temple, his breath warm against her cheek. "Together."

She sniffed. "I never cry."

"You deserve to cry," he whispered.

The air wasn't pure enough. She couldn't get enough to stop her chest from quivering. Panting, she clung to the arms that held her. She needed her world to stop shaking.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Kingsley

In the distance, birds cried, echoing off the mountain. Besides the wild animals, they were alone on the mountain peak.

Kenna moved on top of him in a tireless rhythm. Kingsley gripped the curve of her waist, pulling her down and lifting her up.

The wind whispered through her hair, spreading the strands over her shoulders. His cock pulsed inside of her.

Lifting his head, he ogled the sight of her pussy squeezing down on him. Her wet juices coated his dick. He could feel the tension building in Kenna, her muscles tightening, her breaths growing deeper. The moment was near, and he held back, savoring the anticipation.

He moved his right hand, skimming her clit with his thumb. She ground down on him, moaning.

Her pussy spasmed. Pleasure curled his toes in his boots.

Suddenly, she arched her back, her eyes fluttering closed. A soft moan escaped her lips. He thrust up one final time and came inside her.

Her whole weight came down on him. His balls throbbed, totally spent.

Her pussy pulsed to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He rubbed her hips and let his head fall back against the ground.

She flopped forward, laying on his chest. His breathing returned to normal, and he exhaled heavily.

Dark clouds covered the sky as he lay there, feeling the earth move underneath him. A storm was coming.

Today was exactly what they needed after throwing themselves into a regular routine. Kenna worked at the bar, and he dived back into handling club business and keeping Gem Haven running.

"When we get married, I want to hyphenate my name with yours." She sat up. "I want to be Kenna Jade Pruitt-Stafford. It's who I am."

He grinned. "I like the sound of that."

She moved off him. He pushed to his feet and tucked his dick in his jeans.

"So, when are we getting married?" She wiggled into her shorts and picked up her shirt, shaking the dust off it.

"What's your hurry?"

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "You're old. We're wasting time."

He burst out laughing and fastened his belt. "Brat."

"I'm just saying, you're the one who said we're getting married. I thought it would be nice—"

"As soon as the campground closes for the season. We can go into town and have the judge marry us or Barney can say a few words. Whatever you want."

"Barney? The old man who doctored Zora's ankle?"

"The same," he said.

"Can he do it here? On the mountain peak? I want to be married in Gem Haven." She moved closer, putting her hands on his sides and holding him in front of her. "This is our place and it's beautiful here. We could stand on the edge overlooking all the land."

A raindrop hit his forehead. He looked up into the sky.

"I don't want it fancy. I'll wear a dress, but not a white one, and you can wear your leather vest with your newer black jeans. We can invite the members and Big John. Of course, Zora, too. Maybe afterward we can—"

Thunder rumbled. She jumped, looking up into the sky.

"We need to get under cover." He took her hand and led her to the Harley.

A flash of light lit up the air. He got on the motorcycle and held out his hand. When the lightning started, it was dangerous to be on the top of the mountain. They needed to get back home and under cover of the trees.

"Hold on." He turned the bike around and rode out toward the main road.

The raindrops got bigger and landed harder. He should've watched the sky better, but he got caught up in making love with Kenna.

Once on the road, he shifted gears. Kenna shrieked behind him. They were already soaked.

Five minutes later, he rolled to a stop inside the garage. Turning off the Harley, he toed the kickstand.

Kenna slid off, pulling at her wet shirt. Her hair hung straight, plastered to her head. She never looked more beautiful.

He held out his hand. "Let's run to the house."

Now that he had her safe from danger, he enjoyed the way her shirt was tight against her breasts. She laughed, splashing mud and water with each step. Under the overhang of the deck, he pulled her to him and kissed her hard.

"You're soaked." She laughed.

"Let's go up and take a warm shower." He opened the front door and stopped.

Zane and River sat at the bottom of the steps. He tucked Kenna under his arm.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I tried to set up a visit with Dad and was told he doesn't have any approved visitation rights." Zane scoffed. "Looks like the old man got himself in trouble again."

"That doesn't surprise me." He shook the rain off his hair. "I'm going to take Kenna up and dry off. There's a hell of a storm going on out there."

Zane moved off the steps, making room for them to get up the stairs. "Yeah, I'm waiting it out. Then, we're going to the clubhouse to play a game of pool with the

others. River wants to see what it's like on Friday nights."

River smiled at her sister. "Do you want to come?"

Kenna looked at him and shrugged. "It's up to Kingsley."

"Yeah, we could go for a while." He led her up the steps. "We'll probably grab something to eat at the bar first and then head over."

At the top of the stairs, Kenna dashed forward. He hung back, stripping his clothes off in the bedroom. The water turned on in the shower. She was already getting warm. Carrying his wet clothes to the hamper beside the dresser, he spotted her sketchbook open and glanced at the drawing.

No one needed to tell him it was Big John. She'd drawn him on his Harley. The likeness was striking.

After finding out about the relationship with the girls, his vice president went back to the cabin he lived in behind the clubhouse and continued to drink himself stupid every day. He and Zane wouldn't let him continue much longer, but the man deserved to mourn his sister in his own way.

"King?"

He turned away from the drawing and walked into the bathroom naked. Right now, he was going to enjoy his time with Kenna.

His fiancé.

For years, he'd known she belonged to him. He only had to wait until she grew up and realized it, too.

Kingsley

A coffee mug sailed out the clubhouse door and shattered against the wall. Kingsley stuck his head in the doorway, checking if it was safe to enter.

Zane stood with his back toward him and his hands planted on hips. His broad shoulders set in that stubborn pose he recognized. He'd seen his brother like that many times, but things were going okay lately. River was in his brother's bed. Valdones Motorcycle Club had backed off on threatening Gem Haven. Big John put the cap on the whiskey. The tourist season was almost over.

"Trouble?" he asked.

Zane turned around. "Mom's missing."

"Since when?" His mom had walked to the house last week, bringing flowers for the girls and enough to decorate the bar.

"Big John went over to the cabin yesterday to check on her and again earlier today. The door is locked, and there's no sign of her around." Zane ran his hands through his hair. "The water cistern for the nearby spring is full, with no sign she's watered her flowers."

"Maybe she went walking and twisted her ankle again. Has he—?"

"Yeah." Zane exhaled heavily. "I went out after him and looked around. There's no sign of her."

Heaviness settled on his shoulders. His mom continued taking her medicine after the last episode, when she turned up at the bar, yelling for Ridge. She seemed to want a relationship with him and Zane, which motivated her to keep taking the prescription.

"Big John takes her to her doctor's appointment once a year. He says she has refills every three months until November." Zane shook his head. "I guess that doesn't mean she takes the medicine."

"I'll grab one of the UTVs and go out looking for her." Kingsley stopped from leaving the office when Zane continued to frown. "Is that all that's going on?"

"I wish." Zane met his gaze. "I called the prison to see if Dad's name was back on the list for family visitations, and apparently, Ridge Stafford has no more allowed visits on the schedule."

"Are you shitting me?" Frustration filled him, and he scoffed. "He fucked up again."

"He was close to getting parole, too." Zane motioned with his chin. "That's why I threw the mug. I hoped Dad would be back this winter, and we could have a seamless transition during the slow season."

"It looks like you'll be Prez for a little longer." He crossed his arms.

"Yeah, not what I wanted. Everyone knows Dad will return someday and step right back into the role of president." He clicked his tongue. "I never wanted the role."

Kingsley strode to his brother and clasped his hand. "You've done more than was required while keeping everyone alive."

"Thanks, brother," he murmured.

He backed away, heading toward the door. "I'll grab Kenna and go look for Mom."

"I'll get some groups ready and send them out to walk the perimeter around the cabin," Zane said as he walked through the clubhouse with him.

In the main room of the clubhouse, Zane slapped him in the chest, stopping him. "Look."

Big John stood with Kenna and River near the couch on the side of the room. He had the attention of both girls. Kingsley couldn't tell what they were talking about, but Big John's hands were pointing and moving.

"I bet River's about to piss her pants with happiness," murmured Zane. "She can't understand why Big John didn't welcome her to the family with open arms. I finally told her that he was locked up in the cabin, drinking his problems away. Of course, she wanted to go there and try to talk some sense into him. That was the last thing Big John needed."

He'd gone through the same thing with Kenna when she'd heard about Big John closing himself off by everyone.

Suddenly, Kenna grabbed Big John's arm. Her whole posture changed. Kingsley strode over with Zane right beside him.

"Don't worry. She must be around here somewhere." Kenna patted Big John. "I'll get Kingsley, and he can—"

"I'm here." He slowed to a stop. "What's wrong?"

"Big John told us Zora's missing. She's not at the cabin." She moved to him. "Can we ride over there?"

"That's what I planned to do." He rubbed Kenna's back. "We'll find her.

"I want to look for her, too." River took the sweatshirt she had in her hands and tied the arms around her waist. "Where should we start?"

"Stay with me. I'm going to get the men put into groups and scout the area." Zane motioned for Big John. "Tell me where you've looked."

"I'll keep calling when we have cell service." Kingsley grabbed Kenna's hand and stepped away, leading her toward the door.

"I hope she's okay." Kenna hurried beside him.

There were many hidden dangers on the mountain, both four-legged and two-legged, not to mention his mom's mental health was in question.

Before they could leave, the door burst open. Every muscle hardened at the sight in front of him. Kingsley pulled Kenna back and stepped in front of her.

Ridge Stafford stood in the doorway, wearing an old pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his Gem Haven Motorcycle Club vest with the President patch over his heart.

His dad's gaze landed on him before sweeping across the room and connecting with Zane. Then all hell broke loose.

"Look whose back, motherfuckers," shouted Ridge Stafford.

"Oh, my God. What's your dad doing here?" Kenna pulled on his arm. "Did he break

out of prison?"

It came as no surprise that his dad would've got early parole and not said a word to anyone. "Nope, it looks like he's a free man."

The members rushed the man who'd bought, built, sacrificed and spilled blood to grow Gem Haven Motorcycle Club from the ground up. Kingsley looked away from the celebration and found Zane walking toward him. What made Zane a good president was that he hid his emotions, and the men couldn't tell what was happening in his head. But, as his brother, he could see the relief on Zane's face.

No matter how old and independent he got, there was always relief when his dad was around to keep them safe and protected. To see the club prosper and MC families thrive.

Zane and River stopped beside him. "Let him have his celebration. We'll go out and look for Mom."

He nodded, following his brother out the door. But they didn't get far.

"Where do you think you're going?" bellowed Ridge. "I thought you'd be glad to see me."

Kingsley turned around. " Mom's missing."

His mother was no longer a secret. No one would put her in a cabin and forget about her. He and Kenna welcomed her into the family.

"Nah, she's not missing." Ridge narrowed his eyes. "She's right where she wants to be, sons."

"And where is that?" asked Zane.

"At home. In the cabin." Ridge held up a whiskey bottle. "Safe and happy and smiling."

Behind him, Big John scowled, staring at Ridge. Kingsley waited until his dad went back inside before shaking his head.

"The son of a bitch was with her," muttered Zane.

"Twelve years in the slammer, he walks back into Mom's life like no time had passed." Kingsley held Kenna's hand tighter. "I'll go check on her."

"Stay here. I'll check on her." Big John stormed past him on his way to his motorcycle.

Kenna let go of his hand and jogged after Big John. Kingsley took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit one, and tossed it to Zane.

"I'm going to see what's going on." River jogged toward her sister and uncle.

Alone with his brother, he blew a stream of smoke into the air. "Did you see that happening?"

"Nope." Zane widened his stance.

There was a look on Big John's face when he realized that Ridge was home and had spent time with Zora before walking into the club. The vice president wasn't happy. And there was only one reason why a man had that dark of look. It always involved a woman.

"The mountain is going to blow," he whispered.

Big John and his dad were best friends. There weren't two more loyal men in the club. But Ridge Stafford had been gone a long time, leaving Zora alone. Big John had stepped up and become Mom's caregiver. He wasn't going to like someone else stepping onto his territory.

Kenna and River returned to them. He spread his arms and brought her to his chest.

"Big John's mad," whispered Kenna. "I think he feels protective of Zora."

He kissed the top of her head. "I think you're right."

"What's your dad going to say?" she asked.

"Probably, a whole hell of a lot." He inhaled deeply. "But that has nothing to do with us. Now that we know Mom is taken care of, let's go home and get back into bed."

"You don't want to celebrate your dad being home?"

"I want to celebrate us." He kissed her hard. "Plus, we have a wedding to talk about."

"Oh, you're still going to marry me, huh?"

"Maybe." He grinned. "Are you going to say yes?"

"Maybe." Kenna smiled.

He chuckled. "Brat."

He led her over to his Harley and sat on his motorcycle. Once she was behind him, he

stood the bike up and raised the jiffy stand. But he held off on starting the engine.

"Do you want to go home or up to the mountain peak?" he asked.

She hugged his waist and looked up at the sky. There was not a cloud in the sky.

"Let's go to the peak."

He patted her leg, started the Harley, and drove away from the clubhouse. She had no idea that next weekend, he planned on taking her back to the peak where everyone Kenna wanted at the wedding would share the day with her so he could marry her.

By next Saturday, she was going to be his ol' lady—for always.

Part 1

Chapter One

"Hank, God damnit," bellowed Sterling Sweeney. "Get your ass in my office."

Lucy, Hank's mom, cast her son a frantic wave to obey his father. Every fiber in his body wanted to walk out and close the door to Glacier Crest Ranch.

His dad ruled everything as far as the eye could see.

He shook his head as he marched past his mom. He thunked his boots against the hardwood floor on the second story of the lodge that the town folks called Sweeney mansion. Not an hour after he'd beat Denny Geone's Trans Am with his Camaro on the River Front Road, the fucking loser had run to his daddy, whining about losing his title.

Hank stepped inside his dad's office. The musty smell of cigar smoke permeated the walls, the leather furniture, and the curtains covering the floor-to-ceiling windows. The smell nauseated him.

He only stepped into his father's office if he'd gotten in trouble, and his dad wanted to hand out his punishment.

Rarely had his dad called him there to congratulate him or give him a bigger

allowance for all the shit he was required to do for the family .

His dad poured whiskey into a tumbler and glared at Hank. "Give me the Geone boy's title to his car."

He stiffened his spine. As long as he was alive, his dad always drank four fingers of whiskey in two swallows when his temper brewed.

"Denny knew the deal. I won fair and square." He widened his stance. "You can tell his dad to fuck—"

"God damnit, give me the title, or I'll drag your ass down there, and you can hand it back yourself." His dad slammed his empty tumbler on the desk in a show of temper he only released on Hank.

Hank slipped his hand into his back pocket, retrieved the folded piece of paper with the rights to the Trans Am, and flung the vehicle title on the desk. He then stormed out of the office. It was useless to argue against Sterling Sweeney unless he wanted to sport a black eye or broken ribs tomorrow. His dad had a heavy hand, and despite being sixteen years old, Hank couldn't stop his old man from bringing the wrath down on him.

His mother reached for him. He stepped out of the way, avoiding her touch, and pushed through the front door. Outside, the wrap-around porch sheltered him from the afternoon sun.

Not stopping, he jumped over the steps and landed on the pebbled path. He planned to move out as soon as he turned eighteen.

He'd need to go far away to escape his dad's control. Sterling Sweeney had more men than Hank could count watching everything that happened in Whitefish, Montana.

"Hank, come back," called his mother.

In dismissal, he waved his arm above his head and kept walking toward the two-story garage. If it weren't for his father, his mother would be happy. She'd find an interest away from the ranch. As it was, each year, she grew quieter and cut herself off from everyone she knew. All because his dad humiliated her in front of everyone.

It was common knowledge that Maria, the woman who lived in the cottage behind the house with her daughter and cooked and cleaned for his family, was his father's whore. The only person who never said anything about him having an affair was his mom.

He walked through the garage door and grabbed the push broom. Raising the handle over his head, he ran toward one of his dad's collector cars, a Ford Galaxie. All his anger was bottled in his chest, ready for release.

Jade rode her bicycle in front of him and stopped. "What are you doing?"

Maria's young daughter was always running around the ranch. At her age, someone should watch her better. She could get hurt.

"Get outside." He gritted his teeth. "Go."

His dad set strict rules so she would not leave the backyard and the asphalt pad on the side of the horse barn. A working ranch had too many dangers for a little girl if she wandered too far into trouble.

At six years old, Jade had more guts than most people had around his dad. For some reason, his dad had a softness for the girl. She never feared punishment because the worst she'd ever received was a scolding.

Jade got off her bike. "I can help you clean the garage."

"What?" He glanced at her.

She pointed above his head. He lowered the broom and dropped it on the concrete floor. All the steam went out of him.

"You better go back to the cottage before your mom finds you over here." He thrust his hands into his hair. "Or my dad catches you."

"I'll hide." She grabbed his hand. "I'm small. I can show you where you can hide."

He exhaled harshly and walked away, shaking his arm to dislodge her. But she held on tight.

"Do you want to play?" she asked.

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing." He stopped beside his dirt bike.

"Can I go on a ride with you?"

"No."

"Please?"

He grabbed the handlebar and lifted the bike off the stand. "No, Jade. Go away before you get in trouble."

Rolling the bike backward, he turned the front wheel. He reached down on the left side, flipped the kickstart, and planted his foot on the lever.

"Where are you going?" Jade planted her hands on her waist. "When are you coming back?"

She was nosier than his mom, always wanting to know where he was every minute of the day. He shifted his weight, putting everything he had into starting the bike, and gave it some throttle. The two-cycle engine sputtered to life, cutting off Jade's next question.

He lifted his chin, urging her again to leave before she got in trouble. Her little bottom lip stuck out, and she walked toward her bicycle. He gave the dirt bike some throttle and rode toward the door.

Caught up with Jade pestering him, he hadn't seen his dad follow him out to the garage until the broom he'd left on the floor was thrust into the spokes of the front wheel of his dirt bike. The sudden stop threw him against the handlebar. He toppled off the motorcycle, sprawling on the concrete.

The broken wood handle rolled toward him. He grabbed the stick, jumped to his feet, and prepared to defend himself. But his father, yielding the rest of the handle, came ready to fight.

Hank jerked back, but the fragmented stick caught his cheek, cutting a hot streak across half his face. Stumbling, he dropped the only thing he had as a weapon and balled his fists.

"No bike. No car." His father threw the stick behind him. "Not until you learn to listen to me, boy."

His jaw ached, but he refused to unclench his teeth. He'd only anger him more if he pushed his dad too far. While he'd never seen his old man lift his hand on his mother, it wasn't a chance he'd take.

"Clean up the mess while I go deal with your shit." His dad walked over to the Jaguar, slid into the driver's seat, and drove out of the garage.

Shaking with rage, Hank stared out the door long after the car was out of sight. One day, he'd kill the son of a bitch who fathered him.

Soft sniffles broke through the haze. He closed his eyes an extra beat, knowing he'd turn around and find Jade. It was bad enough to have someone else witness his father's abuse. But the child should've been home, safe, and protected.

Darkness hung over the Sweeney Ranch. Amidst the greed, corruption, and danger, a spot of sunshine floated around with the innocence of a baby.

But Jade was growing up. She had eyes.

Someday, all the evil would touch her. If it hadn't already.

He turned around and walked to the back of the garage. Jade ran out from behind a car and threw her arms around his waist. He held the back of her head.

"Come on." He nudged her toward the door. "I'll walk you back to the cottage."

She looked at him as she walked, clinging to his hand. "You're bleeding."

"I'll be fine."

Tears continued to roll down Jade's cheeks. "He's your dad. Dads aren't supposed to

hit their kids. Why is he so mean to you?"

"He's mean to everyone," he muttered, striding across the grass.

"But—"

He stopped and kneeled in front of her. "I don't care if he's nice to you, Jade. You can't trust him. Do you hear me?"

She nodded.

Her cheeks remained wet from her tears. He hardened himself against the fear radiating off her. Jade would need to toughen up to live on Glacier Crest Ranch or she'd never survive.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:12 am

Dust from the hay floated in the sunbeam coming through the barn window. Jade twirled with her hand above her head, disrupting the air and sending the tiny particles floating in new directions.

Copper neighed. She lowered her arm and stepped over to the horse, hugging Copper's neck.

"I love you." She kissed the smooth coat on Copper's jaw, laughing when the pony tossed her head. "I know. I want to go for a ride, too. But momma won't let us until someone can teach me."

Mr. Sweeney gave her Copper on her tenth birthday. She'd only rode the horse during her birthday party. Since then, Mr. Sweeney and her mom told her she couldn't ride until she had lessons.

"I'll save all my money I get for doing chores to buy lessons, Copper. I promise." She smoothed the mane where it always tried to fall between her ears and get in her eyes. "By summertime, we can ride to the creek behind the cottage. Doesn't that sound fun?"

"How will you do that when you're not allowed to ride the beast?" A deep familiar voice startled her.

"I'm going to learn." She grabbed Copper's halter and led the horse toward the stall door, closer to Hank. "I'll be as good as you when you ride Charger."

Hank reached over the wooden door and rubbed Copper between the ears, messing up

her mane again. "I was riding horses before you were born."

She focused on him. "Who taught you?"

He stared at the pony, continuing to stroke her head. Jade thought he wouldn't answer, but then he swallowed, making that lump at the front of his neck move.

"My dad."

"Oh," she whispered.

She'd learned long ago not to ask him about his dad. Thinking about his dad put Hank in a bad mood, and he usually walked away and wouldn't stay and talk to her.

Mr. Sweeney was mean to his son. He not only yelled but hit and kicked Hank, too. He made him bleed.

It made her sad because Mr. Sweeney was nice to her. He'd even bought Copper for her. Though, momma wondered why he'd buy her a gift that cost hundreds and thousands and gazillions of dollars.

Horses were expensive and not toys.

But she'd return Copper to Mr. Sweeney if he stopped hitting Hank. She'd hate to say goodbye to Copper, but someone else would love him if he were given away. Hank had nobody but her.

Mrs. Sweeney never stopped Mr. Sweeney from hurting Hank. Even her momma wouldn't say anything to stop Hank's dad from beating on him when he was angry.

She'd known Hank her whole life. Ever since momma moved into Mr. Sweeney's cottage, back before she could remember.

"Why don't you hop up on the horse?" He patted the board. "Bring her over here, climb up, and slide onto her back. I'll lead you around the paddock."

She glanced back at Copper and bit her lip. She really, really wanted to ride.

A heaviness settled in her chest. She couldn't ask Hank to let her. If anyone found out, Mr. Sweeney would get mad.

"I can't," she mumbled.

"Why not?"

"Mr. Sweeney and momma said I need riding lessons." Her throat tightened in disappointment. "I haven't saved enough money to hire someone. I get two dollars a week. I don't know how much it'll cost, but I'm going to save all my money. I won't even buy ice cream when momma takes me into Whitefish."

"That's bullshit." He opened the stall door, lifted her, and held her until she grabbed Copper's mane. "My dad has more money than anyone in the county. I'll teach you if he won't pay for your damn lessons. Go ahead climb up."

She climbed up to the top rail and threw her leg over the horse. Squeezing her legs, she held on to the mane. Without a saddle, she'd fall. But she wanted to ride more than she worried about falling. Hank would make sure she stayed on Copper's back.

"Relax." He put his hand on her back. "Copper ain't going to let you slide off."

"How do you know?"

"I know." He grabbed the halter and led the horse out of the stall.

Hank stopped in the sunshine and pivoted, taking her behind the barn. The paddock

was in the opposite direction.

Her stomach fluttered. Used to the uncomfortable but exciting way Hank always broke the rules, she sat straighter in anticipation of what he would do. She wasn't worried about getting in trouble for herself. Momma would set Mr. Sweeney right, the way she always had when he came to the cottage in a bad mood.

"Why do you ride your motorcycle so much when you could ride horses everywhere you wanted to go?" She relaxed, riding the bumps as Copper walked. "Horses are quiet. Your motorcycle is loud."

Hank glanced away from her, walked a few more feet, then stopped Copper. "Because the old man can't stop me from riding something I paid for."

"Like Copper was a gift to me, so she's mine to ride whenever I want, right?" She patted the horse's neck.

"Yeah." He looked around the area. "Same thing."

A grove of trees blocked where the creek filled the pond. She'd walked that way with her mom plenty of times. Behind her, the barn blocked the view to the Glacier Crest Ranch, where her mom worked, and Hank lived with his parents.

A clink drew her attention back to Hank. He undid his belt buckle and pulled the leather strap out of the loops on his jeans.

She leaned forward and scratched Copper underneath her neck where she liked to be rubbed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving your horse a little freedom to take you on a ride." He studied her. "You're not scared, are you?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm not scared."

She liked being on top of Copper. Even without a saddle, riding was fun. It was her favorite thing to do in the whole world. She never wanted to stop.

Hank looped the end of his leather belt through the halter, then threaded the leather through the buckle, making a long lead. Jade kicked her feet at how smart he was. Copper shot forward, rocking her.

"Whoa." Hank put his hand on Copper. "Mind your feet, Jade. Any time you tap her sides, she's going to walk."

She held on tighter. "I want her to walk."

"Then, let's go for a walk." Hank stepped back, holding the end of the belt in his hand. "When you want her to go, you click your tongue—"

"I don't know how."

He stepped toward her again. "Put the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth." He squinted at her. "Now press the rest of your tongue up there." He paused. "Got it?"

She nodded because she couldn't talk with her tongue pushing up.

Hank reached out and grabbed Copper's halter. "Now, pull down your tongue."

She opened her mouth. Hank chuckled and looked away. "Let's try it a different way. Put your tongue back on the roof of your mouth."

She followed his instructions.

"Without moving your tongue, pretend you're sucking a milkshake up a straw."

She sucked her cheeks in. She held her breath with her tongue on the roof of her mouth.

"Okay, drop your tongue."

A soft click came from her mouth. "I did it."

"Good enough." He stepped back, holding the belt. "Now click again, and at the same time, tap your heels gently against Copper's sides."

Doing exactly what Hank had taught her, the horse shot forward. She tightened her hold on the mane, tottering from side to side. Caught up in the excitement, it took her a moment to realize that Hank was standing in one spot while Copper walked in a circle around him.

She rode for several minutes, around and around. Every time Copper slowed, Hank told her to tap her heels. Each time the horse listened to her, she shared a smile with Hank. He was teaching her how to ride.