

**HOPE & HAPPINESS**  
*Sons of Anarchy Stories*  
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## **1. Big Changes**

Hap woke to the cold, wet smear of Tigger's nose on his back. "Shit, buddy. Down." He swatted the dog away and put his arm back around Vivian's waist, tucking her close.

Two seconds later, the baby monitor was redlined; Hope was wailing like a fire engine. She sure as fuck had her mother's lungs.

Vivian stirred and started to get up. Hap squeezed her hip. "I got her, honey. Sleep for a couple more minutes." He got up and started hunting in the dark for jeans or boxers or something.

He couldn't find anything. There were clothes and shit all over the floor. The baby was screaming. The dog was whining. Hap stubbed his toe. "Fuck!" He swore mostly under his breath.

Vivian sat up, blinking sleepily. "I'll get her. It's okay."

"No! Stay put. I got her. I just can't find my pants, and I'm not going in there with my dick swinging."

"Turn on a light, Hap." She reached out and did exactly that, switching on the lamp on her nightstand. He was almost standing on his jeans.

"I didn't want to wake you up."

Hope was really winding up; the baby monitor was practically shaking. Vivian gave him a dry smile. "Are you kidding me?"

"Yeah, okay. That was stupid." He pulled his jeans up. "I don't know how this place got to be such a fucking mess."

"Because you've been gone almost a week, and I have more important things to do. Don't be an ass, Hap."

"I didn't mean it like that, honey." He kissed her forehead. "I got her. You just get the milk shop open."

As soon as he opened the door to his daughter's room, he was blasted by the smell. He forged ahead. "Oh, f—f—. Oh, man. We talked about this, midget. We had an agreement. You're supposed to save these for your ma. Or a Prospect. We had this worked out. Now

I got no trust.” He looked down at his perfect little girl. She stopped squalling when she saw him and stared up at him, making little hiccup noises.

He waited too long to pick her up, though, and her lip started to quiver again. Then she screwed up her face—he wondered if it made him a bad father to think that face was cute as fuck—and got to wailing again. “Okay, okay. Come here, stinky. Wow. That better all be in your Pamper. We are *not* having a bath at 4am. Right?” She stopped crying as soon as she was in her father’s arms.

He lay her on the changing table and unsnapped her little onesie. He couldn’t believe he now actually said the word *onesie*. His life was not what he’d once thought it would be. He did a quick check—the situation seemed contained. “Good girl.”

He opened the diaper. Fuck. Yellow shit just seemed unnatural. Give him a bucket of blood and guts over a diaper full of seedy, yellow crap any day of the damn week. “You listen to me, midget. If you ever tell anyone—*anyone*—that I ever did this, I’ll”—he had no idea how to threaten a 2-month old—“I’ll ground you till you’re 80. Got it? Not one word.”

He got her changed and brought her into their bedroom. Vivian was waiting, topless, the pillows arranged just so. He laid their daughter against her mother’s chest. Vivian cradled her head and helped her latch on.

Watching his wife nurse their daughter was the sexiest fucking thing Hap had ever seen in his life. It made him feel a powerful mix of emotions he couldn’t fully identify. But they were all good, and they always made him uncomfortably hard.

Once they were settled and Hope was going to it, Hap got back in bed and slid up against Vivian. He put his arm over them both, his hand on his daughter’s back.

He kissed Vivian’s shoulder and then rested his chin there to watch. Hope was looking up at Vivian, suckling with determination. Her little hand rested on Vivian’s perfect, round, beautiful breast. Christ. He had to close his eyes for a second to get some control, and still he couldn’t resist thrusting his hips against his wife’s ass with a grunt.

She gasped. “Hap, you have no idea how that messes with my head. It feels weird to be thinking of you like that while I’m feeding our kid.”

“I can’t help it, honey. It’s so hot.”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. “You know you’re a freak, right?”

He just grinned and kissed her, his tongue pushing into her mouth, searching deeply. She moaned. Hope unlatched with a pop, and Vivian turned back to resettle her. “See, she thinks it’s weird, too.”

“Okay. I’ll wait. But I’m in line. He leaned over Vivian’s shoulder and looked down at his little girl. “Make sure you save me some, midget. Don’t be a hog.”

Vivian laughed. “Freak.”

“Yep. And you love it.” He gave her shoulder a little bite.

“You’re right. I really do.”

## 2. Milky Way

Hap stood in the doorway and watched Vivian put their sleeping daughter into her crib. He'd been standing in the hallway, listening as she rocked and sang while Hope nursed and then settled into slumber. He felt peaceful. And horny as fuck.

At first he'd been surprised, and a little disconcerted, but how powerfully he responded to Vivian being a mother. His lust for her was substantial in its own regard, but watching her with Hope made him literally dizzy with need.

It was all sexy: the way she talked to her, the way she sang, the way Hope would stare up at her so intently, with what looked like devotion, squeezing her tiny fists around Vivian's fingers. Or the way she'd smile at her mother. So far, those smiles were reserved only for Vivian. Or the sight of her cuddled against Vivian's chest, that little fist in her mouth. He found himself constantly needing to touch his wife—rub her shoulders, nuzzle her neck, run his fingers through her wild, black mane. Wrap his arms around her waist and hold her close.

But watching her nurse? Christ. He'd watch and imagine taking her other breast into his mouth. Sometimes it was all he could do to restrain himself. Even he thought that was weird. But he'd never had much of a problem with weird. He wasn't in Tig's league—Tig was in a league all his own—but he was okay with weird.

Vivian indulged him. She liked it, too. God, he fuckin' loved her. She had one rule, though—only right after Hope had nursed. So Hap was standing in the doorway, waiting for his turn.

These days, Hope was usually good for four solid hours before she'd be up again. But that was no guarantee, so as far as Hap was concerned, time was a-wastin'. He had every intention of devoting every single minute from now until Hope was awake again to making his wife scream. Okay—not scream. Moan. But loudly. Into a pillow.

They really needed to get Tara and Jax to babysit again. He was pretty sure it was their turn, anyway.

She turned around and saw him. Her top was still unbuttoned. She stopped gave him a wry smile; she knew what he wanted. He crooked his finger at her, and she walked up to him and put her arms around his neck.

He pulled her hair loose from the big clip she'd had it bound up in, and he ran his fingers through it silk to fluff it out. Leaning down to nuzzle and nip at her neck, he rasped into her ear, "Come on, woman. Daddy wants dessert."

She laughed and pressed tighter to him, her open shirt against his bare chest, rubbing her hips against his cock, which was straining against the seams of his jeans. "We should get you some help, you know. You are a deviant."

“Yep. Definitely need help. Let’s get to it.” He swept her up and took her across the hall to their bedroom.

Closing the door behind him—and leaving the dog on the other side—he laid her on the bed and yanked his jeans off. She started to strip as well, but he stopped her. “Let me do that for a change.” She had a thing where she preferred to take her own clothes off, but he had a thing where he liked to strip his woman. Usually she got her way.

She sighed and put her hands out in surrender. Then she raised her arms over her head and stretched, smiling at him seductively.

“Christ, woman!” Hap lay down on her and pushed her bra up to free her beautiful goddamn breasts, full and firm and round. She’d always had great—no, *fantastic*—tits, but now? Sweet Christ. He put his face between them, plumping them with his hands so that they were pressed against his cheeks. She smelled of milk. And honey and lavender. His eyes rolled up behind his closed lids.

She gave a low, sultry chuckle. He pulled up even with her head and kissed her, his tongue plunging deep into her mouth. When she sucked it even deeper, he moaned and thrust his hips against her.

She pulled back. “I thought you wanted to take my clothes off. Because now you’ve got me all bound up, and I gotta say, it doesn’t feel wonderful.”

He looked down at her chest, where her bra was cutting across the tops of her breasts. “Sorry, honey.” One nipple was leaking; he leaned down and licked it.

She gasped sharply and arched. “Hap!”

He slid one hand under her and released the hooks of her bra. She sighed with relief, and he grinned. Then he sat back on his knees and pulled her up, so he could pull her shirt and bra off and toss them away. Since Hope was born she’d favored his plaid button shirts and a pair yoga pants or leggings—or, like now, no pants at all, since his shirts came down almost to her knee. Practical clothes. For the same reason, she’d been wearing her wild, wavy hair bound up in that big clip. Practical. Shouldn’t be sexy. But fuck if it wasn’t.

Now that she was topless, he laid her back on the mattress and then pulled her panties off and cast those away as well. He took a minute to appreciate her, running his hands smoothly over her torso and limbs, not yet touching her breasts. He wanted to get her moaning.

It had only taken her these three months to get her body back. There had been such concern while she was pregnant about how her scars would handle the stress of her expanding belly that she’d been prescribed all manner of creams and things to keep her

skin as pliant as possible. So she had not a single stretch mark, and her stomach was as firm as ever. It wasn't perfectly flat, but it was firm, and Hap preferred a woman with curves instead of angles.

She was moaning now and arching into his hands; he growled a little as he felt her flexing under his palms. "You are so fuckin' beautiful, Vivian."

Breathless, she smiled up at him. "So, are you going to pet me or fuck me, Hap?"

He first responded by sliding two fingers along her folds, playfully flicking and pinching her clit until she was twitching erratically. Then he pushed them into her, pumping firmly. "Fuck, Hap," she gasped. "I need more. What's it gonna be?"

"Oh, I'm gonna fuck you, honey. I'm gonna fuck you silly." He shifted, bringing his legs from under him so that they were stretched out in front, under her legs and along her sides.

She looked up at him with a little furrow in her brow. "What are you up to?"

He just grinned and adjusted her legs so that they were relaxed on either side of his hips. "I want to get to all of you at once." Then he grabbed her hips and yanked her toward him, making sure he was positioned so that he slid easily into her wet heat as he pulled her all the way to him.

She was lying between his legs, his feet on either side of her head. He had her hips were canted up, and he was deep inside her—so deep, in fact, that when he pulled her hips and thrust up into her, her eyes got huge, and she cried out, "Holy fuck! Oh, lord, you fill me up."

"Shhh, honey. Shhh."

He crossed his forearms under her back, his hands around her sides, and lifted her up a little. Thrusting steadily into her as she flexed on him, he bent over at the waist and took one of her lovely breasts into his mouth. She wrapped her arms around his head, and he suckled her.

He doubted he could describe the sensual power of her milk filling his mouth, but it was intense as hell. She tasted sweet and rich and, fuck, it about undid him. The knowledge that this was how their child was nourished and grew strong only turned him on more. The pace of his thrusts doubled as he suckled her, grunting against her breast with every deep plunge.

She was riding him hard, her back arching deeply as she flexed on him. She was moaning—too loudly—but now he was far too lost in his own ecstasy to care. He sucked harder and she gasped, "Oh shit! Why does this feel so fucking good? Lord!"

Her hips were moving wildly now, and she was making a low keening sound. He was ready to go; he'd been ready to go for awhile, but he couldn't hold off any longer. He released her breast and sat back, grabbing her hips and taking control of her, yanking her hard against his thrusts until she screamed, closing her mouth at the last second, while he roared through clenched teeth.

Gotta remember to talk to Jax and Tara about babysitting. Soon.

He pulled her up so she was chest to chest with him, and they rested like that for a few minutes until their breathing eased. Then he shifted them again and lay down with her, still chest to chest. He pulled gently out and kissed her closed lids.

"Fuck, Hap. That was amazing." Her eyes were still closed, but she had a big, easy smile on her lovely face.

He pulled her up against him; as his cock came into contact with her, it swelled. "Yeah, it was. But I'm not done with you yet. I think I have room for seconds."

### 3. Flying Solo

“Okay. You sure about this?”

Hap took the baby out of Vivian’s arms. “Get the f—. Get out of here, Vivian. You’re starting to piss me off.”

“It’s two days, Hap. This was a bad idea.”

“Out. Christ.” He shifted Hope to his hip, put his hand on the back of Vivian’s neck, and kissed her soundly. “Get out. We’re fine.”

“You remember how to warm the milk? No microwave.”

“Woman, do I have to throw you in the back and have a Prospect drive you? I got this.”

“Okay.” She kissed the baby and finally got into her SUV. She put her arm out and stopped the door as Hap tried to close it. “Stay out of the milk, Hap.”

“Honey, you know I only like it from the source. Go. Now.” He closed the door and watched her finally drive off.

When she’d turned the corner and was out of sight, Hap held his six-month-old daughter over his head. She laughed down at him.

“Okay, midget. Let’s do this.” A long rope of drool left her mouth as she grinned, but Hap dodged it, and it landed on his shoulder. “Really? You’re gonna do me like that? Maybe no bananas for you then, you’re not careful.” He settled her on his chest and went back into the house.

-oOo-

Hope had been crying for more than an hour. Hap couldn’t figure out what she needed.

Everything had been fine all afternoon. She’d sat in her bouncy thing in the yard while Hap had started building the new table and chair set for the patio. When she started to fuss, he’d changed her and rocked her to sleep.

Vivian had called while the baby was sleeping, and Hap had been able to report that everything was great and she should chill the fuck out and go sing. She’d been looking forward to this guest spot with her old band for weeks.

Then Hope had woken up crying. She’d taken most of a bottle, but she fussed the whole time until she finally refused it, and now she’d been crying since.

If he put her down, she screamed louder. If he stopped moving, she screamed louder. So he had her on his shoulder, and he was striding around the house, patting her back and bouncing her, trying to make her burp, or just soothe her with the motion, or something. Tigger followed behind them, whining.

But all he was accomplishing was making it very easy for her to scream right in his fucking ear. He was worried. But he was also losing his patience. And he was starting to feel angry.

*Get control of that shit right now, asshole.*

“Come on, midget. Come on. Daddy needs a minute. Shhh.” She was so wound up she felt hot, and her little face was beet red.

He did not know what the fuck to do. He thought about calling Vivian, but she’d be on stage by now.

Then two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, Hope spit up, in a gush over his shoulder and down his back. He actually heard it splash. It was hot and viscous. She was blissfully quiet for about two beats, and then she took one whooping breath and started in again.

Then, while he was still trying to comprehend the idea that he had curdling breast milk running down his back, the motherfucking doorbell rang. Fuck that. He ignored it and tried to deal with the mess.

He wiped Hope’s mouth with a cloth diaper and laid her in the playpen so he could pull his t-shirt off. He wiped up the mess with it as well as he could. As soon as he’d laid her down, she amped up her wails. Sweet Christ.

The alarm alerted that the front door had opened. Hap had set the alarm, as always, when’d he come in, and the warning tone was going off now. Shit! He wheeled around and crossed the room to get his gun, just as he heard the code being entered. *Vivian?*

“Happy? It’s me. Everything okay?”

What the fuck was Frank doing here? Before he could answer, she was standing in the entrance to the living room, where he and Hope were. She had the code because she’d babysat for them a few times.

Having an audience right now was the last fucking thing he needed. “What are you doing here, little girl?”

“Viv asked me to stop by, see how things were going. Sorry I let myself in, but I could hear Hope, and I wasn’t sure you could hear the door. I can spell you if you need a break.”

“Fuck.” He was righteously pissed at Vivian for having somebody check up on him—and Frank? Who was practically a kid herself and didn’t even fucking have kids?—but, yeah. He needed a minute, if only to clean up. “Yeah. She spit up. Just gonna wash up, then you can go.”

Frank picked up his still-shrieking daughter and said, “You got it.”

When he came back after cleaning up and getting a fresh t-shirt on, he had to admit he was heartened to see that Frank had had no more luck than he—Hope was still going strong, screaming like a banshee. She had to be getting tired by now. Right?

“Thanks. I got it from here.” He took Hope from her. Damn, he had a headache.

“Hey, Happy—I don’t think she just spit up. I think she might be sick. She’s really warm. You have a thermometer?”

That hadn’t even occurred to him. She’d been great just a few hours ago. “Yeah. One of those ear things, in the hall bathroom.” Frank went to get it.

101.8. Fuck. What kind of shitty father misses something like that? And now he had no goddamn idea what to do. “I’m calling her doctor.” He handed Hope off, again, to Frank.

-oOo-

After giving her a tepid bath, another bottle, and some infant Tylenol, Happy was sitting in the rocking chair in Hope’s room, holding his exhausted but finally quiet daughter against his chest. She was awake, sucking on her hand. Every now and then, she’d take a deep breath and sigh it out.

He was kicking himself for getting angry at her. She was teething. The doctor had asked him to take a look and told him what to look for, and there was the littlest white spot on her lower gum. At least she wasn’t really sick.

She made a little whimpering noise, and Hap held her closer. She had to be so tired. The lights were low, and he was rocking steadily, but she wouldn’t close her eyes.

He knew what Vivian would do now. But Hap did not sing.

He did not.

Ever.

Under any circumstances.

No fucking way.

Hope made that little whimpery sound again, and this time it lasted a bit longer.

He couldn't even think of any song he knew all the words to.

Well, except one.

But it wasn't a lullaby.

Very low, just a rumble in his chest, really, Hap started singing "I Shall Be Released."

She was asleep by the time he made it through the song. He sang it through once more, just to be sure. Then he laid her in her crib and crept quietly out.

Frank was standing in the hallway right outside the door, a knowing smirk on her face.

"I'll cut your tongue out." He sent her his most intimidating look.

She laughed quietly. "Hey, dude. It dies with me. I promise."

"Good girl."

"But that was sweet as fuck."

"Go home."

-oOo-

When Vivian got back the next evening, Hap was feeding Hope mashed bananas. She came in and kissed her daughter on the top of the head and her husband on the mouth.

"How'd you two do?"

Hap smiled at his perfect little girl with black hair and dark eyes like her mama. "We did great—right, midget?"

#### 4. Birthday Sweets

Hap brought the keg into the kitchen and set it on the floor next to the table. He dropped the keys to Vivian's cage on the table.

She was standing at the kitchen counter, frosting a sheet cake. Her hair was caught back in a clip, exposing her neck. Far as he could tell, she was wearing nothing but one of his shirts. It was an old one, the neck stretched out so much that one of her shoulders was exposed. Damn, she turned him on. She looked over that bare shoulder and smiled as he came in.

"Thanks for that. I don't know how I would have had time to get to the liquor store today."

She bent down to get something out of a lower cabinet, and Hap looked his fill at her beautiful, round ass. It was quiet; Hope must be napping. "Case of whiskey still in the cage. Prospects are bringing ice." He nodded at what she was doing. "I don't know why we need such a big-ass cake. There's gonna be three kids here. Everybody else will be drinking, and whiskey and cake don't really mix."

Ignoring his complaint, she spread more pink frosting over the chocolate cake. Hap came up behind her and put his hands on either side of her, hemming her in. He nuzzled her neck, breathing in the intoxicating scent of her. He leaned his body into hers. "She sleeping?"

Turning into his kiss, she murmured, "She is. But I have to get this cake decorated. There's still a lot to do"

He stuck his finger into the bowl and scooped some frosting out. "Fuck the cake." He smeared the creamy pink stuff onto her neck and licked it off. "Mmm. Sweet." He scooped out another fingerful and did it again, running the frosting down the slope of her shoulder this time.

She huffed. "Hap, come on! You're getting man germs in the frosting."

He pushed the cake aside. Lifting her by the waist, he turned her around and dropped her on the counter. "I said fuck the cake." He pushed between her legs and moved his hands slowly up her thighs, his thumbs finding their way to her core. She wasn't wearing underwear. Christ. "'Cause I want to fuck my wife." He opened his jeans and pulled her hips to the edge of the counter. With his long legs, he was at exactly the right height, and he slid right in and brought her close. She gasped at the penetration and put her arms over his shoulders.

He groaned. "Ah, honey, you're so wet. You weren't thinking about cake."

Reaching behind her, Vivian scooped her own fingerful of frosting. She smiled and pressed it to his lips. He thrust into her as he sucked her finger. Her muscles clenched around him and she moaned softly. “I was kinda thinking about cake.”

All sorts of delicious ideas were bouncing around in his head now. He yanked his shirt off of her, leaving her totally bare to his gaze and his touch.

With a nod at the bowl of frosting, he asked, “You kick my ass if I ruin the rest of this?”

Her smile was indulgent and excited. “I’m pretty much done with the pink. You’ve already had your filthy paws in it, anyway. What d’you have in mind?”

“How long we got?” He remembered the days when they could just fuck and not worry about time. Yeah, those days were long gone.

“She went down half an hour ago. People are supposed to be here in three hours. We have a little time. 30 minutes, anyway.” He also remembered the days when 30 minutes wouldn’t even be a good start to their foreplay.

Not that he’d trade their girl for any of it.

“Good. You’re gonna need a shower soon.” Still inside her, he lifted her off the counter and laid her on the tile floor. “Too hard?”

She took the clip out of her hair and stretched luxuriously. “Nope. Get naked. You’re gonna need a shower, too.”

Grinning, he pulled out of her, making her gasp, and stood. He put the bowl of frosting on the floor next to Vivian and stripped. When he went to the floor again, he learned that the tile was too hard for his 50-year-old knees, though, and he grabbed the throw rug from in front of the counter and pulled her onto it.

He spread her legs and knelt between them. Scooping frosting out in both hands, he massaged her beautiful, firm breasts, coating them with sweet, creamy pink. Since Hope had been weaned a month or so ago, Vivian’s breasts were a bit smaller than they had been. They were still fantastic, but Hap missed the nursing days.

He moved his hands down and over her belly, too, until there was little frosting left on his fingers. Then he lay on her and kissed and licked all over her belly. When he’d gotten all the frosting he’d spread there, he licked one breast clean, his tongue flicking firmly over the nipple until he had her squirming and gasping. “Fuck, Hap.” He suckled her, letting his teeth bear down just a bit, and she arched her back, pushing her breast harder into his mouth. She grabbed one of his hands and sucked the fingers clean, mimicking with every finger the way her tongue would pulse and twist when it was his cock in her mouth.

He closed his eyes and took a controlling breath. Fuck, this was hot. With the frosting from their kid's birthday cake. Best not to think too long on that.

He shifted and switched to her other breast, paying it the same attention as the first, and she sucked the sweet cream off his other hand in turn. He nipped at her breast and she moaned. The vibrations moved through his fingers straight to his cock. "Christ, Vivian. I need to be fucking you."

Instead, she pushed on him. "I haven't had my treat yet. Flip, mister." He did as he was told.

Now she scooped up some frosting. She rubbed it in her hands and straddled him, reverse cowgirl style, resting just above his crotch. He brushed her hair off her back, so he could see his mark across her. He couldn't see what she was doing, but fuck, he could feel it as she ran her frosted fingers up and down, over and around his raging, rigid, rod. He flexed his hips and groaned. "Oh yeah, honey. Fuck, you feel good." He felt the familiar pressure in his gut and closed his eyes, letting himself go with it.

But then she stopped. He opened his eyes, and she was looking over her shoulder at him with a grin he could only think of as naughty. He'd been ready to protest, but her look changed his mind and had him curious. She rose up on her knees and scooted back, straddling his face.

This was one of his favorite things on God's green earth, right here. No way he was landing in any kind of heaven, but if he did, it would be this—his face buried in his wife's perfect pussy, his cock down her throat. Forever.

"Ah, fuckin' A!" he growled and grabbed her thighs. She resisted him, though, and their eyes met as they both looked between their bodies. He furrowed his brow at her—he'd fucking spank her if she didn't let him taste her now.

"Hold up there, cowboy." She dipped her finger back into the bowl and came up with a little dab of pink. Reaching down between them, she left it as a dainty little dot on her clit. She winked. "There ya go. Have at it." Then she took him into her mouth. The feeling of her mouth on him, licking and sucking away the frosting, brought on an ecstasy so intense his head dropped hard back to the floor and he saw stars.

For a second, he just lay there awash in the sensation. Then she flexed against his face, rubbing frosting into the scruff around his mouth, and he got to work. Her moans vibrated around his cock and he couldn't help but thrust more deeply into her mouth.

Vivian was flexing hard and fast, and he had to lock her down so he could stay on her. He sucked her clit hard, closing his teeth just enough that he could draw it through them, and she came, her juices filling his mouth. She didn't break tempo on his cock, though, her tongue, lips, and hands working apace even as her moans got louder and louder until her hips stilled completely and he felt the muscles in her legs and pelvis go rigid.

*Fuck, Hope, stay asleep. Stay asleep, midget; don't interrupt this, please. Daddy will buy you a pony if you just let him—oh sweet Christ, oh Christ—*

As soon as he felt her relax, he let himself go. He was right there, ready, and the next time she sucked him down, he went off, biting into her inner thigh to contain his roar.

She collapsed on him, and for a moment they lay tangled on the floor, panting. Finally, he raised his head. “We should get in the shower; we’re pushing our luck.” She nodded, and they untangled and walked to their bathroom.

They washed each other in the shower, and Hap was hard again before Vivian had even finished his back. As soon as they were both free of frosting, he turned her around, to face away from him. He preferred her to face him, but he knew she liked it this way, and in the shower it seemed to work best anyway.

First, he just held her close, his arms around her, his hands moving over her breasts, her belly, her hips, through the dark hair between her thighs. She’d rested her head on his shoulder and was completely relaxed, letting him have his way with her.

Unable to control himself for much longer, he pushed her shoulders forward, folding her at the waist. She put her hands on the tile wall and looked back at him. She was panting heavily, and her eyes—Christ, they were intense. “Hard, Hap. Fuck me hard. Fill me the fuck up.”

He growled and did what she asked, pushing hard into her and then grasping her hip in one hand and her shoulder in the other. She cried out wordlessly, loudly—*stay asleep Hope, stay asleep; Daddy will buy you anything you ever want, just stay asleep*—and surged back on him, making him penetrate her as far as he possibly could.

Not one iota of control remained in his grasp. “Christ, Vivian!” he grunted. Then he let go and pounded into her. She came hard and fast and almost immediately. She came again before his own release exploded in him and he pushed her hard up against the tile wall.

As they were drying off, the baby monitor—which Vivian had had the presence of mind to bring into the bathroom with them—sounded an emphatic end to Hope’s nap. Vivian grabbed her robe off a hook on the back of the door. “I got her.” She raised up on her tiptoes and kissed Hap’s cheek. “You rock my world, Hap. You rock the hell out of it. And now you get to clean the kitchen.”

He gave her ass a pinch as she headed out to collect their daughter. He got dressed and went out to tackle the mess they’d made.

## 5. Standing Up

Straddling his Dyna, Hap walked it out of the garage and down the driveway. He stopped about halfway down and strapped on his helmet, looking around as he did so.

Yeah. Third day in a row that silver Taurus was parked in the same spot, just slightly down the street. Someone sitting behind the wheel.

Surveillance.

Not a Fed, though; Fed surveillance would be a different vehicle than this rental sedan. Best bet? Private investigator. But why the fuck a PI would be on his house, Hap did not know.

He'd be finding out, though. Today.

He pulled away and down the road, turning at the first corner. He looked back as he turned; the Taurus had not moved.

He hadn't expected that.

He lapped the block and pulled up along the side street, back far enough that he was shielded by the neighbor's shrubs but could still keep tabs on the Taurus. He pulled his prepay out of his pocket and dialed.

"Hey, Hap."

"Need a favor, Juice. Run a tag for me."

"Problem?"

"Got eyes on us—on Vivian, looks like."

"Fuck. One sec. Okay, give it to me." Hap did. As he was recited the tag number, the garage door came up, and Vivian backed her SUV down the driveway. Taking Hope to preschool. The Taurus started up.

"Gotta go, Juice. Call when you have it."

"Yeah, Hap. Be a couple of minutes, tops."

Tailing someone on a Harley required a lot of finesse. The bike was loud, and, though smaller than a cage, didn't blend in well. But it was Charming, so Harleys on the road weren't so unusual a sight, and the PI wasn't expecting a tail, anyway. He was intent on Vivian.

When Vivian pulled up in front of the preschool, the Taurus pulled up about five car lengths back. Hap stopped around the corner, again using his surroundings for some cover. He checked the prepay and found he had a message: Juice. The Taurus was a rental, out four days, rented by John Kline, from Los Gatos. No other detail. Juice ended the message asking Hap what else he needed.

Hap closed the phone. He'd get back to Juice when he understood more what was happening here.

He watched his wife pull their daughter out of her car seat and, despite his concern and growing anger over the surveillance, he smiled. Hope, at three, had already become Vivian's doppelganger, with curly black hair growing long, and wide, dark eyes. She was wearing her little motorcycle jacket today, over pink leggings and little black boots.

Hope and Vivian were engaged in something of a wrestle, and Hap didn't need to be any closer to know exactly what was going on. He could see the object of the struggle from where he sat. It was that awful fucking unicorn that Tig had brought Hope when she was born. It was huge—bigger than Hope—and it was vicious-looking, but Hope loved that thing and dragged it fucking everywhere. In the past three years it had gotten mangy on top of everything else. Hap had tried to restrict it to the house, but Hope lost her shit if "Horsey" couldn't go with her. So now that ugly thing went in the cage, too, and it had been dragged through all their friends' houses and most parks and shops in Charming.

But she couldn't bring it into preschool, so mother and daughter were "negotiating" that now, Hope at full volume. Hap had never dropped Hope off at school, and had only rarely picked her up, so he'd never seen this display before. He was simultaneously appalled, impressed, and guilty. Guilty because he'd let Vivian deal with this alone, and she'd never complained once about it. Appalled that his daughter was being such a shit, but impressed at her show of will. *Really* impressed with Vivian's calm in the midst of the barrage—and that she emerged victorious.

Hap would have folded like a cheap lawn chair. He couldn't handle that quivering lip thing Hope did.

Horsey relegated to the backseat, Hope walked docilely with her mother into school. While he was waiting with Vivian's tail for her to come back out, he entertained himself with thoughts of all the ways he was going to show his wife how much he appreciated her, how in awe he was of her, tonight, after the little hellion went to sleep.

Still smiling as he watched her head back to her SUV, he stood, prepared to kick the bike back up. She pulled away. The Taurus stayed put.

The tail was on *his fucking kid*.

Hap pulled the bike around and rode away from the school. He needed to come up on this fucker from behind. He rode to the other side of the block, parked, and dismounted. Fetching the prepay out of his pocket, he dialed Tig.

“Yeah, man.”

“I need the van here, Tig. Got a tail on my kid. Need a talk with the fucker.”

“On Hope? There’s a guy on Hope? I’m there. What’s your 20?”

“Maple and Prescott. Her school. Pull up behind my bike.”

“Five minutes, man. Want your kit?”

His full kit was at home, locked in a cabinet in the garage. But he had a smaller kit at T-M. It should do. This guy would be an amateur at interrogation resistance. “Yeah, bring it. Gloves, too—box on the shelf underneath.”

“Got it.”

Making sure there were no eyes on him, he pulled his piece from his saddlebag and settled it in his waistband, against the small of his back. He pulled his t-shirt over it and palmed his switchblade. He folded his kutte and put it in the saddlebag.

While he waited, he just hunkered down and watched the watcher. The fucker had a camera with a long-range zoom lens, and he was taking pictures of Hope. Of his girl. The red pulsed behind Hap’s eyes. He knew just where that fucking lens was going.

Tracking the PI’s sightline, he saw Hope’s teachers leading the kids out to the little playground and took a quick second to find his girl. She headed straight to the climbing gym and scrambled up. One of the teachers—a hot young thing with tits almost as good as Vivian’s—pulled her off when she got too high. Hope lost her shit. He grinned. His girl had a temper. He was well acquainted with it.

She got it from her old man. And he was about to use his. He saw the van pull up. Tig put the window down, and they nodded at each other. Hap signaled that Tig should come up with him. Then he approached the Taurus.

The guy was off his game, sucked at his job, or thought this was a harmless surveillance gig and had no idea how dangerous it really was, because Hap got right up on him without ever gaining the fucker’s notice.

With one hand, Hap yanked the camera away and dropped it to the ground; at the same time, with his other hand, he pressed his switchblade against the fucker’s jugular. “Be still. You and I need to have a talk.”

“Why did you take my camera and why do you have a knife pressed to my throat?”

The question was odd and too clearly worded; the guy was wired. Okay, Hap could play that game. He pressed the knife harder, drawing a bead of blood now. The guy swallowed, and the blade went fractionally deeper. Hap kept it sharp. “I got no idea what you’re talking about. I’m inviting you for a drink. To talk.”

Keeping the knife tight against the PI’s throat, Hap reached in and grabbed the guy’s collar, ripping his shirt open. No wire there. The car itself, then. Tig came into view, no weapon obvious, except that Hap saw the way he was holding his hand. Blackjack up his sleeve. Excellent. But they needed to get this shit away from a school full of fucking three year olds. Like now.

Moving fast, Hap pulled the knife away and yanked the door open. He pulled the guy out and put him against the car. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tig doing a quick scan of the area.

“We’re good, but we got to go, Hap. Those kids, the teachers, they head back this way, we got problems.” He picked up the camera.

Hap glared at the PI, the blade against his Adam’s apple now. He chose his words carefully. “Easy or hard. Coming?” The guy nodded, staying silent. Hap reached into the pocket of his pleated khakis and nabbed his smartphone. That’s what was recording. He dropped it to the ground and stomped it under his heavy boot, then kicked it to Tig, who picked it up and pulled the SIM.

They walked calmly but steadily, three abreast, the PI in the middle, to the van, and all three climbed into the back. Tig had emptied it of seats, so there was plenty of room to work, but Hap wanted this shit away from Hope. He bound the PI’s hands.

“I’m thinking we take him to the cabin.” Tig nodded, and headed for the driver’s seat.

Now the guy started talking, and Hap began to understand that he’d done some kind of homework—at least enough to know he was in trouble. “I don’t want trouble. I wasn’t going to come near your kid, I swear. It’s a simple location and surveillance gig. Just watching. Photos, light video. That’s all. There’s no bad here. I’m happy to share everything I know. It was about time for contact anyway. I have a package for your wife.”

Hap sat back, disappointed. He wanted a piece of this fucker. Watching his kid. Good for an eye, anyway. But he was flapping his jaw like crazy now that he was trapped back here with an assassin.

“You want my wife and kid, and you think you don’t want trouble?”

“I don’t want them. My client is interested in them.”

Hap still had the open switchblade in his hand. Now, he drove it into the PI's thigh—away from the femoral artery, so not life-threatening, but painful as fuck. The guy screamed.

Hap leaned forward, getting right up in the PI's face. "Who. The *fuck*. Is interested in my family?" He gave the blade a very slight twist.

"Your mother-in-law! Your wife's mother! Fuck, fuck, take it out! Fuck!"

Shocked, Hap sat back, pulling the blade out as he went. "Keep talking."

The PI pressed his bound hands to his bleeding leg. "She hired me to find her daughter. I found her, and you, and your kid. I did my job, reported my findings. She asked for more information, pictures, video. That's why I'm here. I have a box she wants me to leave for your wife. She wants to make contact. That's it. I swear. They were in no danger from me."

Hap leaned forward again. "You listen close. You give the box to me. And your client sees *me*. Not my wife, not my kid. Me. I talk to her. Nothing else. You stay the fuck clear of my family, or I will take my time killing you. You get me?"

"I get you. No problem. Fuck, I don't do shit like this. I do family law cases, that's all."

That set off bells in Hap's head. "Family law? What do you know?" He fisted the knife, blade down, and raised it again. "Talk."

"Jesus! You don't need to threaten me! I mostly do child custody and divorce cases. That's all I meant. I don't know if that has anything to do with you. Far as I know, she just wants contact."

Better be all she wanted. She probably wasn't going to get even that, but if she tried for Hope, he'd kill her. If he even smelled that intent on her, he'd kill her. Not a question. "Set it up. With me. Where's the box?"

"In the rental car."

Hap reached into his kit and pulled out an Ace elastic bandage. He sliced the nylon tie binding the PI's wrists and tossed the bandage at him. "Wrap your leg. We're going back to the car."

The PI hobbled with him back to the rental and pulled a medium-size box out of the trunk. He gave it and his contact information—he was Mike Gehrig of Sunnyvale, licensed investigator—to Hap, and Hap let him go. He watched the Taurus until it was out of sight.

Tig met him at the van and nodded at the box. “What do you think is in there?”

A lot of questions were swirling in Hap’s head. Foremost, he wasn’t sure whether he should open the box and see what was in it, so he could prepare Vivian, or whether he should bring it straight to her. Or whether he should just dump the damn thing and be done with it. “No idea. Take it back to the clubhouse for me? I’ll pick it up there later. I gotta think.”

Before he pulled away, he considered whether he should call Vivian and have her pick Hope up from school. No. If there was danger here, it wouldn’t come that way. It would come via more insidious means.

-oOo-

Once he’d ridden away from that scene and had some distance in his head from his anger, he knew that there was only one answer to his first question. He pulled up into the T-M lot and was dialing Vivian before he’d gotten his helmet off.

“You busy, honey?”

“Just dropping flyers off around town.” Vivian had been performing small singer-songwriter gigs locally, keeping her toe in the music world but staying close to be with Hope and him. Most of her income, though, came from songwriting. She had some pretty big names singing her stuff these days. With that and the proceeds from the sale of Vivian’s Berkeley apartment, they’d paid off a shit ton of medical bills and were making a nice college fund for Hope. She’d be able to go anywhere she wanted. “Why? What’s up?”

“How long before you gotta get our girl?”

“Two hours. Hap, what’s up?” There was a sharpness to her voice now; he hadn’t figured out his tell, but he had one—at least where she was concerned.

“Everything’s okay. But I need to talk to you. And I need the cage. Meet me at the clubhouse. Ten minutes?”

“Less. I’m just at the Grindhouse.” She hung up without saying more; she was freaked. Shit.

He sat down on one of the picnic tables and waited for her. She pulled in fast and was out almost before she’d parked. He stood and headed her way.

“What is going on, Hap?”

“Christ, woman. Control. I said everything’s okay.” He gave her a quick kiss. “But I had an interesting talk with a guy today, and I need to tell you about it.” Scanning the lot, he

could tell the clubhouse would be empty, and Tig had taken the box in there when he'd gotten back. "Let's go inside."

He led her to one of the leather sofas. "Sit." She did, and he sat next to her. "Now, just listen. We've had someone watching the house the last few days."

"*What?! And you think that means everything's okay?*"

"Vivian, I said listen. No, I don't. But it's handled. And I need to tell you about it. It was a PI, watching you and Hope." She started to say something, but he shot her a look and shut her down. "He and I had a chat this morning when I saw him taking pictures of Hope at school."

She grabbed his arm. She was seriously agitated, and what he was going to say to her now wouldn't calm her down any. "Your mother hired him, Vivian." He stopped there, let her digest that part first.

She said nothing, but her eyes were wide. Then, "My m—what? Why?"

"PI says she wants contact. He had a box she wanted him to give you. It's behind the bar now."

She sat back. "Why now? It's been seven—almost eight—years since I've even laid eyes on her. Since Granny died."

"I'm guessing it's Hope. She has a granddaughter." It's why Hap's antennae were up.

"No, she doesn't. Gemma's all the grandma Hope needs. I don't want contact. She can fuck off."

"Not a problem. I told the PI to back off and that I would meet with her. I'll send her packing."

"Wait, Hap. No. You shouldn't have to deal with her. You've never met her."

"Not *have* to, honey. *Want* to. I want the woman who sat back and let her husband set her daughter on fire to look me in the eyes. Just once. And then I'll send her back to her hole."

Her eyes met his and searched deeply. Vivian would never see in his eyes what her mother would. Never. Finally, she smiled a little. "Okay. Thank you." She kissed him, and he let her lead.

Pulling away at last, he asked, "You want me to dump the box she sent?"

"No. I'm morbidly curious. Look with me, though? I'm also a little scared."

“You bet.” He went behind the bar and brought the box back to her. With his switchblade, he sliced the tape and opened the box.

At the top was another box, about 12x6x6. Hap lifted it out—it was heavy for its size. He handed it to Vivian. She opened the end and slid out a metal canister. She gasped.

“Oh, fuck me. Is this her idea of a joke?” She turned the canister so Hap could see the side she’d seen. There was a small metal tag welded to it, with her father’s name. “She sent me the motherfucker’s *ashes*? What the fuck else is in there?” She yanked the box forward and peered in. “Oh, shit, all this is my father’s stuff. Oh shit! What? I don’t—what? Why?”

Hap pulled the box back and set it on the floor, away from her. His eye caught an envelope in the box, and he pulled that out and laid it on top. Then he went to the sofa and pulled his wife into his arms.

She settled in to his embrace. “I’m okay, Hap. Really. I just don’t get it. After all this time, after everything—does she still refuse to see?”

“Looks like there’s a letter in there.”

Sighing, she sat up. “What the fuck. Might as well see what she has to say.” He snagged the envelope and handed it to her.

*Dearest Viv,*

*I’m very glad to have found you. It has been a long time. I have been alone for years now. I would like not to be alone any longer.*

*I was delighted to learn that I am a grandmother. I would very much like to meet this little girl. I have seen a few pictures, and I hope to see more of her soon. She is lovely. She looks much like you. And her grandfather. You do take after your father so.*

*I have included this letter in a box of mementoes of your father. He was a strong, uncompromising man, I know, but he did much good. I hope you have come to terms with your feelings about him. It was cold of you not to join me in laying him to rest, but I have forgiven you.*

*I know there were some difficulties between us, but I hope that you now see that they are of the past. I have forgiven you for your abandonment of us; I hope that you have forgiven me my failings as well.*

*I must tell you that I am dying. I wish to lay past resentments to rest before I rest myself.*

*Finally, as I set my affairs in order, I must make arrangements for my estate. Your father was very successful, as you know, and he invested wisely. He took care of his family, even after his death. There are funds and assets worth a considerable sum for which I must choose an heir. I fear there is not a great deal of time before I must make this decision.*

*Please contact me, Viv. I am your mother, and I would have my family intact.*

*Most sincerely,  
Your loving mother.*

Without a word, she passed the letter to Hap. He read it and looked up. “Christ. Is this even real? Did a human being write that?”

She huffed. “That’s my loving mother. Not sure about the human part. Cold, weak, passive aggressive, and proper as all hell. ‘Go ahead and beat the kid, dear, better her than me—just make sure the neighbors don’t hear.’ And she thinks I can be fucking *bribed*.” She stood and kicked at the box. “Dump it, burn it, bury it in the septic tank. I don’t care. I want her gone. Her and her ‘considerable sum.’ But I’m going with you to meet her. I want you there, because I want her to get a load of you. But I want to make sure she knows *I’m* making the call. I hope she really is dying, and I hope it hurts like crazy. But if she ever comes within a mile of my kid, I will kill her myself.”

-oOo-

They left Hope with Frank and Juice and met Vivian’s mother at a restaurant in Palo Alto. It was a ritzy kind of place, one in which Hap’s kutte didn’t fit. The maître d’ got about halfway through a sentence explaining that at least a sport coat was required before he decided to waive that rule for the tall, menacing biker glowering at him.

As they approached the table, Hap saw Vivian’s mother’s surprise—they had not told her that Vivian would be with him—and he also saw Vivian’s pleasure in that surprise. They stood at the table; her mother remained seated.

She was a small, desiccated woman, her pale skin loose and dry. She wore a wig—obviously expensive, made of real human hair, but still obviously a wig—very pale grey, cut in a conservative short style. Her eyes were small and bright green, her lips thin. Hap was surprised how little she looked like Vivian. He saw no family resemblance at all.

She wore pearls and a simply cut suit in a kind of peach color. Her hands were clawed with arthritis but perfectly manicured. Truly, Hap wasn’t sure he’d ever been in speaking proximity to this kind of woman before. Not really his circle.

“Hap, this is my mother, Amelia Green. Mother, this is my husband, Happy Lowman. But I’m sure your private investigator already told you as much.”

Amelia extended one ravaged hand, “Pleased to meet you—Hap, is it?”

“It’s Happy. Only people I’m close to call me Hap.”

“I see. Well, Happy—that’s an unusual name. I wouldn’t say it suits you.”

He simply held her gaze.

“Well, sit. I’ve had the waitress leave menus. Order whatever you like, of course.”

“We won’t be staying to eat, Mother. We’re only here so that I could look you in the eyes and tell you this: never contact me or mine again. Never hire someone to watch us or keep tabs on us in any way. You say you are dying, and I tell you that it doesn’t matter at all to me. You’ve been dead to me for years.”

Her mother’s face had gotten even paler, and her eyes darted around the room. Hap realized that Vivian hadn’t been especially quiet as she spoke, and Amelia’s chief concern was the attention they were drawing, not what her daughter was saying. The woman was a real piece of work.

Vivian leaned forward and continued. “And, Mother, if you come anywhere near my kid—you make any kind of overture whatsoever or have somebody watching her—I won’t wait for whatever you’ve got to kill you. I’ll do it myself. I’ll do it by setting you on fire.” That got Amelia’s attention. Her hand went to her throat and fiddled with the pearls resting there. Hap found himself having to suppress a grin. His wife was a badass. His cocked stirred.

“Did your PI do enough research to tell you about my husband? Do you understand that I am not making empty threats?”

It took her a second to compose herself, but when she spoke it was with chill calm. “Cancer is what I have. It’s what killed your father as well. Not that you asked, of course.” She cleared her throat and sat straighter in her seat. “Such bitterness only makes you small, Viv. I’m sorry you feel that way, but very well. I know enough to be concerned about the life you’ve chosen, yes, and to be appalled that you brought a child into it. But I don’t have long enough left to effect a change. So I shan’t contact you again. You are free to live the life you choose. Not as my heir, of course.”

Vivian stood up. Hap did too. “Goodbye, Mother.” She turned and walked toward the entrance; he followed.

He’d expected to be the one doing the talking, putting the shrew in her petty place. But Vivian really hadn’t needed him here; she’d had this. He was impressed as fuck at his old lady, facing down this old demon. It was fucking hot, in fact.

Just as they hit the lobby, he grabbed her arm. “Hey, come with me.” He pulled her down a hallway to the restrooms.

“Hap, what—oh shit, seriously?”

He pushed her into the ladies’—and stopped in his tracks. Jesus Christ, there was a *couch* in here. And flowers. There was perfume and hairspray and who knows what else arrayed in trays on the marble counter. He turned to Vivian, his hand still around her elbow. “Is this what all ladies’ rooms look like? Fuck!”

Laughing, she pulled him back to the stalls—which were fucking huge, with actual doorknobs on wooden doors. “The fancy ones, yeah. You’ve never fucked in the ladies’ before? We could have a go on the couch, if you want, but we might give a doddering old biddy a heart attack. My mother, even.”

Kicking a stall door open, he pulled her in. “Privacy is better.”

“I can’t believe you want a fuck after all that.” She was wearing leather pants and low-heeled boots; she kicked a boot off and pulled one leg out of her pants and her thong. He was ready and grabbed her bare leg at the knee as he shoved into her, groaning.

“Are you kidding? You got no idea how fucking hot it was watching you shove all that in her face. It was beautiful. You are amazing, Vivian.” He needed to shut up now and concentrate. Her leather clad leg came up off the floor and went around his hip; he pushed her harder against the wall of the stall.

He pounded fast and hard, grunting with pleasure and effort. She squeezed him tight and chanted, “yeah, yeah, yeah,” under her breath. When she topped over, she dropped her head to his shoulder and bit into his kutte, giving his leather her scream. He mastered the urge to roar and just let the release wash over him, his eyes rolled back in his head.

When they’d wiped up and pulled themselves together, they exited the stall and came face to face with, yes, an elderly woman, looking aghast. Hap nodded at her as they left the bathroom and said, “Ma’am.”

## 6. Training Wheels

Vivian knocked on the door of the room she called his “man cave” and he called “my room.” Part armory, part vault, part workspace, part respite from females. “Hey, Hap—got a minute? You should see this.” She spoke through the door; she knew never to open it unless invited.

Hap was cleaning his guns, NASCAR on the TV on the wall. He set the brush and solvent down on the table. He closed the cap on the solvent before he went to open the door. “What’s up, honey?” She was smiling, so it must not be a crisis.

“You should see what your daughter is up to.” He was shirtless; she slid her fingers into the waistband of his jeans and pulled a little. Woke his cock right up, and he put his hands on her hips. But they were talking about their kid.

“My daughter? So she’s up to no good then.”

“Come and see.” She pulled again, and he closed and locked the door before she led him down the hall toward the dining room and the sliding glass door to the backyard. He looked out through the security bars on the door. Hope was on the patio, sitting on the concrete, wearing little denim shorts, a white t-shirt with a red dog on the front, and sparkly black sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a puffy ponytail.

Tigger was lying on the grass behind her, his massive head on his gigantic paws, but his eyes intent on Hope. He’d followed Vivian around everywhere until Hope was walking; since then he was the best babysitter they had. They could leave her alone in the backyard while they were inside, because she could not have been less alone. That dog would chew out his own heart before he’d let anything happen to his girl. And he’d damn sure chew up anyone who came near her uninvited.

The bike she’d gotten last week for her fourth birthday was upside down on the patio.

Actually, it wasn’t exactly the bike she’d gotten for her birthday. Bobby had given her a bike, but it had had princesses on it, and Hope had blown a gasket. She hated princesses. She wanted a motorcycle like her daddy’s and her uncles’.

It had almost ruined the party, because the temper thing was wearing on Hap. He’d reacted too strongly to her snit, picking her up by the forearms and getting in her face. She’d just glared back at him, and he’d yelled, making her cry. Then Vivian had intervened. So he’d yelled at *her*. A nice little scene right there in the yard, friends and family sitting in a loose circle around them.

In the end, Vivian had taken Hope aside and talked to her, and a contrite little girl had climbed up into her Uncle Bobby’s lap. She’d apologized and thanked him for the bike. She’d kissed him on his bearded cheek. Charmed, he’d told her he would take her back to

the store, and she could pick out one she liked better—not a motorcycle, not till she was bigger, but a bicycle she liked better.

And Hap had ended up the bad guy.

Which he supposed he was, shouting at his four-year-old daughter. Because she'd shown her temper. He was a hypocrite, too. Not his best day as a father.

He and Vivian had talked long into the night after the party, and after Hope had gone to bed, sitting out on the patio, eventually wrapped up together in a blanket. She was so damn calm. She had all the sass she'd ever had, all the fire, but something had clicked in her when, against every goddamn odd there was, both she and Hope had come home healthy from the hospital.

When it came to things among the three of them, Vivian was fucking serene. She was sometimes the eye of a storm surrounding her, because her old man and their kid could let loose. On this night, as usual, she wasn't any angrier at him for losing his shit than she'd been at Hope for losing hers. But she wanted to talk it out.

So they did, and they were good, and then they'd fucked on the patio, Vivian in his lap, the blanket around them. Christ, he loved her. It still bowled him over.

Bobby had been good as his word, and had picked Hope up in the T-M wrecker—which she loved—and had taken her to Charming Wheels, where they'd returned the princess bike. She'd selected a little boys' bike, black with blue and white racing stripes. That's what she had upended on the patio now.

Hap squinted—what was she doing? “Is that a screwdriver? Where'd she get a screwdriver?”

“I'm guessing the junk drawer in the kitchen. It's the little convertible one I use for random shit. You see what she's doing?”

He made it out. “She's taking the training wheels off. I think she's getting it done, too.”

“She is. You should go out there and talk to her.”

He nodded. He knew what his wife was doing. It was often his tendency these days to step back and let her parent. She was just so much better at it than he was, especially now that Hope was talking—and talking back—so much. Vivian saw him do it, and she blocked his way backward. He was glad of it. He wanted to be a good father. He just didn't know how, and it got harder to figure out every day.

But working on bikes? That he could do. He slid open the door and went out to the patio. Hope was intent on her task; she'd almost gotten the first wheel off. She didn't look up from her work as her father squatted next to her. “Hey, midget.”

Still twisting the screwdriver, her sweet little face bunched up in concentration, she said, “Hi, Daddy.”

“Whatcha doin’?” He watched her work. She was careful and precise, especially considering she was four. He was impressed and starting to get ideas for when she was older.

The first wheel came off; she picked up the screw (it was really a slotted bolt), nut, and washer and set them in the little wheel well. Keeping the parts together. Nice. “Taking the baby wheels off. I’m not a baby. Don’t want baby wheels.”

“They’re there to help you learn how to ride the bike, though.”

She sat back, giving him a serious look. “Did your bike ever have baby wheels?”

He knew she meant the Dyna. “Different kind of bike, midget.”

“I want a bike like yours. You learn me how to ride. I don’t want the wheels to learn me.”

“Teach. *Teach* you how to ride.”

She huffed petulantly, not in the mood for her vocabulary to be corrected. “Yeah. You do it.”

His daughter was precocious and perpetually impatient, always charging out ahead of what she should do, where she should be, for a little thing her age. She was already reading, and now she was working on her own bike. “You think you’re ready for that? Just got the bike a few days ago.”

“NO BABY WHEELS!” She kicked the bike, and it fell over with a crash. Tigger raised his head and whined. Ascertaining that it was just Hope being Hope, he put his head back down. Hap thought that if that dog could have rolled his eyes, he would have.

He closed his eyes and took a breath. Quietly, he said, “Enough, Hope.” He was going to stay calm. It worked for Vivian, and his yelling never worked, except to blow everything up. She looked up; he rarely called her by her name, unless she was in trouble, and he used that now to good effect. “A good rider takes care of her ride. Pick it up and get the other wheel off. You do that, and I’ll teach you.”

She grinned at him—fuck, she was cute; how did she turn it around so damn fast?—and scrambled up to pick up her bike. Balancing it on its handlebars and seat again, she sat down on the other side and got to work on the next bolt.

Hap stood. “Good girl. I’m gonna go in and get a beer, then I’ll sit out here with you while you work. Okay?”

“Yeah, Daddy.” She barely had a thought for him now; she was busy. Hap went inside.

Vivian was in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher. “That looked serious. I saw the flare. Everything good?”

“Yep.” He stood behind her, his hands on her hips, and kissed her shoulder. Pulling the neck of her shirt and baring the shoulder, he kissed her again and spoke softly against her skin. “Gonna teach her to ride it without the baby wheels—her words—today. Said I would if she got the wheels off.”

Vivian looked out the window over the sink and shook her head. “That girl just won’t stop for a minute. You know she’s going to get frustrated. She’ll fall. Will you be okay with that?”

“I got it, honey. I am the Zen master. Promise.”

“Well, that’s a bloody lie, but I trust you anyway. You know I’m taking video, right?”

He laughed. Hope’s entire damn life was on digital files on Vivian’s computer. “Figured as much—just stay out of our way. We got shit to do.” He turned her face so he could kiss her on the mouth. She spun in his arms to face him, and he kissed her until she moaned, her nails drawing trails down his still-bare back.

Pulling back and resting his forehead on hers, he rasped, “I gotta get out there. Told her I was getting a beer.”

Vivian slid her hand into his jeans and grabbed his cock, and what little swelling it still had left to do, it did. *Fuck*. “Well, we’ll just bookmark this right here, then, until later. You go be daddy.”

“You’re sending me out to our kid with this? Damn, woman.”

She pulled her hand back out and turned back to the dishes. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He smacked her ass, grabbed a beer, and went back out, pulling around a chair and sitting down to watch his daughter work. It was taking her some time, but he had no urge to intervene. He watched her figure it out. The screwdriver slipped repeatedly and she huffed, but she stayed calm and kept working.

The prepay rang in his pocket. *Goddamn it*. He stood and fished it out, walking into the yard, away from Hope, as he answered. “Yeah.”

It was Butch, a Prospect. He had a question about a tow call that had just come in to the garage.

“One, this is the prepay, shithead. You don’t use it for garage calls. Two, I don’t give a fuck about a tow call on a Saturday I’m not working.” He snapped the phone shut and headed back to the patio.

Still working the bolt out, Hope looked over at him as he sat down. “Daddy, you said shithead. And fuck.”

He’d thought he’d been far enough away, but it was hardly the first time he’d sworn in front of her. He was about to stop even trying not to. “You’re right. What did I tell you about words like that?”

“They’re only for grownups.”

“Good girl.”

“I wanna be a grownup.”

“You will be, midget. You will. Gotta earn your patch, though.”

She nodded somberly. “Yeah.” The last wheel came loose, and, as before, she collected the wheel, bolt, and washer and stacked them neatly together. Then she stood and turned the bike over. Took some effort, but she did it. “Look, Daddy!”

“Good girl. You did great.” He really was proud. Fuckin’ little genius.

“Can I ride now?” She was trying to figure out how to make the bike stand up like it had before she’d taken the training wheels off. It didn’t have a kickstand, though, and she was having trouble working that out. “Daddy?”

He came over to her and took the handlebars. “Here, let’s lean it on the post, and we’ll get you a stand later. You ready to ride?”

“Yeah, Daddy!”

“You missing somethin’?”

She thought for a minute. “Helmet!” She ran to get the little Bell helmet, made to look a lot like the brain buckets the Sons wore. She came back with it on her head, backwards. “Ready, Daddy!”

“Hold up a sec.” He resituated her helmet and helped her fasten the strap. “Okay, midget. Get your bike and we’ll walk it up front.”

As they came around the house, Tigger taking the rear, Hap saw Vivian standing on the porch, her phone out. Video, as threatened.

“Call the dog, honey.” Last thing he wanted was Tigger having a conniption trying to protect Hope from the danger of bike-riding.

Vivian called, “Here, Tig,” and gestured with her hand. The dog looked conflicted for a second, but he never ignored Vivian. Head down, reluctantly, he walked to the porch and sat at her side. She scratched his ears. “Good boy. Down.” He lay down. “Stay.” He huffed.

Hap could read that dog like he was a damn person.

Hope got astride her bike and Hap held on. He walked her slowly for a bit, showing her how to stop using the coasting break and having her practice that. Then he got her started. He ran her down the street exactly once, passing about three houses before he could feel that she’d taken over the balance and he let go. He didn’t tell her; he just let go. She wobbled alarmingly and then stabilized. And then she was off, laughing and squealing and pedaling her little legs off.

He hadn’t shown her how to turn yet, though, or laid out any rules, and she was going bat outta hell down the street, coming up on the intersection. Fuck! He ran full bore—and, Christ, he was getting old—until he caught up with her, right before she would have blown through the stop sign as a car crossed the intersection. He grabbed her and pulled her off the bike, letting it fall to the ground. Having just seen her short little life flash before his eyes, for a minute he held her close, near sure he was having a heart attack.

Hope fought his hold energetically, hammering his legs with her sparkly little shoes. “Daddy no! I was riding good! You didn’t take care of my ride!”

Clearly, they’d needed a few more lessons before he’d sent her off down the street. “Stop kicking right now, or I put the bike in the garage and you can spend the rest of the day in your room.” She stopped. Her lip was quivering. He hated that. It did something weird to his insides and turned him into a pussy. “Sorry I dropped your bike, midget. You did real good. I’m proud. But there’s some more things to learn, before you can ride on your own. Let’s take the bike back, and I’ll teach you some more.”

The look Vivian gave him as they approached the house indicated that there would probably be no picking up where they’d left off in the kitchen. She seemed a lot less serene than usual just at that moment, but she didn’t say anything.

Turning was harder, of course, and Hope fell three times, but she simply got up, picked her bike up, and got back on, even though her knees were scraped. Tough little shit. She had it down within an hour, and Hap had made her recite back the rules three times, pop quizzing her as she was practicing turns and stops. He tried a fourth time, while she was about to get back on after her third fall, and she turned to him with a world-weary shake of her head and stomped her foot. “Daddy! I know!” Laughing, he let her off the hook.

Eventually, pointing out a thin trail of blood running down Hope's leg from her scraped knee, Vivian called them in so she could administer some first aid. Standing next to his suddenly disappointed daughter, he could feel her amping up for a fit. He squatted down and said, "No, Hope. We had a good time. Now it's time to get cleaned up. Your bike will be here for you later. Unless you lose your shit now. Control. Take a breath."

He felt her settle. Then she crossed her arms and turned a critical eye on him. "Daddy, you said shit again."

He had. "Yep. Sorry." He gave up. Filtering his language was beyond him, apparently.

"Don't worry, I won't tell Mommy. I'm not a rat." She patted his hand, and his heart swelled.

She sure the fuck was his kid. He had no idea how he'd landed this life. No way he deserved it. But he'd die before he'd fuck it up. "Good girl." He held his arms out. "Want a ride?"

Grinning, she reached up, and he swung her onto his shoulder, then grabbed her bike and walked to the house.

Near-death experience aside, he thought he'd done okay in the father department this time.

## 7. Family Traits

“Daddy! Frank’s here!” Hope tore through the dining room on her way to the front door. Tigger, as usual, was right behind her, tail wagging. Hap got up and followed them.

Another weekend that Vivian was away. He’d be glad when Leather went back out on the road and left his wife the fuck alone. He knew she loved guesting with them, and he tried not to begrudge her this, but over the past two months, she’d been gone six weekends.

He’d have thought it would be easier to be the only parent for these weekends, now that Hope was five and capable of telling him what she needed or wanted—and capable of entertaining herself, too. But she was exhausting. She wasn’t a chatterbox, but she was insatiably curious and never stopped moving. She hated television, so he couldn’t even park her in front of a movie and get a minute.

He had no idea how Vivian did it. But he knew she was looking forward to Hope starting all-day kindergarten in the fall, and Hap understood why.

He unlocked and opened the door while Frank was still pulling stuff out of her car. Hope and Tigger ran to the driveway; Hap stayed back on the porch.

“Frank! Are we playing?” Hope tackled her around the waist. Frank was really little, only five feet, and Hope was tall for her age. Hap smiled at the relative similarity of their heights. He was calling the wrong one midget.

Frank laughed and hugged her back with one arm; the other was full of her portfolio, her art kit, and another box. “Hey, short stack. What’s shakin’?”

“Are we playing?” Hope yanked on Frank’s shirt.

“Not today.” Hope started her shift into beast mode immediately. Frank was unfazed. “Your dad and I are working on something, but I was thinking you could help us. You want to work instead of play today?”

“Yeah! I’m a good worker!”

Hap thought that was probably a terrible idea. If Frank thought they were going to get anything done with Hope right in the middle of things, she was nuts. He didn’t actually have a better idea, though—he’d just intended to send Hope and Tigger to the back yard and let the dog deal with her. So he didn’t put the kibosh on whatever Frank had in mind. Not just yet. He went down and took the box from Frank, and they went inside, Hope running ahead, and Tigger, with a look back at Hap, trying to keep up.

They went into the dining room, and Frank set down her art stuff and took the box back from Hap. “C’mere, short stack. I’ve got something for you.” She set the box on the floor. It had been closed by simply folding the flaps over each other; now Frank pulled

the flaps open, and Hope squatted down and peered inside. Hap smiled when he saw his daughter's expression: a little "O" of wonder. He walked over to see what was in there.

Paints. Brushes. Pastels. Colored pencils. Markers. Glue. Little plastic scissors. Colored paper. Glitter and sequins. Pipe cleaners. A bag of . . . feathers? Hope dug in, giggling ecstatically.

"Oh, Christ, little girl. What've you done?"

Frank looked up at him. "I can't believe *you* haven't done this yet. The perfect parents, one of you an *artist*, and the kid doesn't have paints?"

"I'm a tattooer, not an artist."

"That's bullshit, and you know it." She looked down at Hope. "Sorry, kiddo."

Entranced by her treasure, Hope didn't look up. Her head in the box, she said, "That's okay. Bullshit is a grownup word, I know. Like fuck."

Frank chuckled and continued her lecture to Hap. "You got me here to paint a mural together—and it was your idea. You know you're an artist. False humility is not your color, Happy. Anyway, I figured it'll keep her occupied while we work. She can 'help.'" She made air quotes. "Right, Hope?"

Now Hope looked up. "Yeah—I'm a good helper!"

Hap shook his head. "Gonna be a f—it's gonna be a mess."

"Oh, boohoo. Everything in there is water soluble. And you love to clean. So let's get busy." She helped Hope unpack her box of goodies and set her up at the far end of the table.

Hap remained skeptical. All he could see was impending mess. Hope had crayons and paper. He didn't know why that wasn't enough. She was only five. Crayons and paper was all he'd had until art class at school. "Why feathers and sequins?"

"Pretty colors, sparkly, soft—maybe you have to be a chick. Feathers and sequins are crucial, trust me."

He shook his head and gave up. Frank and Hope were little but they both had attitude to spare. He was no match.

A month or so earlier, an elderly garage customer had driven into the clubhouse. The building was made of cinderblock, so if he had hit anywhere else, almost all of the damage would have been to the car. But he hit the old garage door, coming in at an angle, plowing over the picnic tables to get there.

So they were renovating the clubhouse. They had contractors doing the big work, but the Sons were helping, too. Hap got it in his head, as they sat at the table talking about whether to put paneling back up on the walls, that the Sons needed a mural, and that he and Frank could do it together. He'd said it out loud, and everybody had instantly thought it was a great idea. And then Hap got around to asking Frank whether she'd be interested.

She wasn't at first, protesting that she wasn't a muralist. She wasn't a realist. She was pretty damn sure the Sons didn't want her abstractions taking up a whole wall. But Hap was persuasive. He knew her work, and he thought she was brilliant. He felt, oddly, proud of her.

And now they were designing a mural. Hap had spread out a long sheet of butcher paper over the dining room table, thinking they could use it to plan the piece. He'd sketched the dimensions of the wall, to scale, on the paper. Hap, the great bulk of his work being body art, approached art in this systematic way—first he understood the space, then he understood the piece that was intended to fill that space, and then he conceived the details of the piece. To him, a wall was no different from a back. Just bigger.

Frank, an abstractionist, wasn't so thrilled with this plan. She didn't make a plan at all; she felt her way. She was doing this for Hap. So they'd decided to do some dry runs, getting her more comfortable. Hap wanted to work with typical SOA themes—the Reaper, the crow, Harleys, leather, ink. But Frank wasn't satisfied with something so obvious. She wanted to tell a story.

While they discussed—argued over—the plans, they left Hope to her own devices. Eventually, Hap realized that she'd been very quiet and looked over to check on her. Frank was talking, making some emphatic point—he was fucking surrounded by emphatic women these days—about wanting to avoid clichés, and Hap put his hand on her arm and nodded toward Hope.

Frank turned and looked. “Oh, look what she did,” she whispered.

Hap was looking. Humming quietly to herself—he recognized the tune as the lullaby Vivian had written for her—Hope was using the colored markers to draw on her arms. She was left handed, so her right arm had the most detail; it looked like she'd tried to do her left, too, but had given that up. Her right arm, though—she'd covered it from wrist to shoulder.

And it was beautiful. Swirls and points of color, little flowers. Drawn by a five-year-old, sure, but a five-year-old with an eye and a pretty steady hand. Hap walked over and took her wrist in his hand, lifting her arm up to get a better look. Hope flinched a little, and looked up at her father, nervous.

His daughter was curious, short-tempered, and willful, and she got in trouble a lot. Hap knew he yelled too much, but he *never* did anything more than yell, and he knew Hope

knew he loved her. They were solid. He wasn't a perfect father, but, with Vivian's help, he was figuring out how to be a good one. He didn't like Hope looking at him that way.

"It's okay, midge. I'm not mad. What'd you do here?"

"Made pictures like you have." She still looked nervous.

"You did. Good work, too." He squatted next to her chair and put his right arm, fully exposed because he was wearing a "wife-beater" t-shirt, up against hers, and they both compared. "I think your arm is prettier than mine." Hope's expression changed to one of pleased pride, and he touched his forehead to her temple. "You like the stuff Frank brought you?"

"Yeah!"

"You say thank you yet?" He knew she hadn't, and she knew it, too. She got somber for a second and then turned to Frank and said, "Thank you, Frank. I like my present."

"I'm glad, kiddo. Thought you would. Now we can make pictures together when we hang out."

Hap picked up the black marker. "You want me to do your other arm?"

Her eyes gleaming, Hope shoved her left arm in her father's face. "Yeah, Daddy! Like yours!" He pulled up a chair and got started.

He looked up after awhile to see Frank watching them, sketching. "What you doin'?"

She smiled. "I have an idea for the wall. Don't mind me. We'll talk later. But I think it's good. It'll be awesome and make us both happy."

After Hope's left arm was as lovely as her right, she was antsy and ready to move on to the next thing. Frank took a picture of dad and daughter and their matching artful arms. Frank and Hope cleaned up the new art supplies, and then Hap sent Hope out back with Tigger to play.

He stood at the door and watched for a few minutes. Frank came up and stood next to him. "I don't want to be here at bath time. It's going to break her little heart when all that washes off."

"Yeah." He chuckled. "Won't kill her to go one night without a bath. Vivian'll be home tomorrow."

Frank popped him in the arm. "You dog! You're gonna lay that scene on your wife?"

"That would be bad, right?"

“Uh, yeah. It would suck. But waiting for a little backup wouldn’t be *too* bad.”

Hap looked down at the young woman standing next to him. She was watching Hope and Tigger avidly, a warm smile dancing on her lips. “You’re good at this, you know.”

Without looking, Frank asked, “What?”

“Kids. You should have some.”

She laughed. “Nope. I’m too crazy. I’m aunt material, not mom material.”

“That’s bullshit. And you know it.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

Now she turned and met his gaze for a second. “Anyway. Let’s get to it. Here’s my idea.”

Hap was impressed. It was a great idea that made use of their respective strengths and really captured the best of the Sons. It incorporated all their symbols—the Reaper, the crow, the bikes, the leather, the ink. But the story it told was of brotherhood.

Family.

## 8. Running Loose

Hap woke panting and turned on as all hell. Vivian was pressed up behind him, naked, her perfect tits pressed hard on his back. She had a hand wrapped around his hard cock, and she was stroking firmly. He looked over his shoulder. “Fuck, Vivian. What time is it?” She gave him an extra firm jerk, and his sentence ended with a groan.

He rolled onto his back, and she shifted with him without missing a stroke, coiling gracefully until she was propped on her side, facing him. “Almost 6:30. Alarm’s gonna go off soon. I thought I see if I could get you to go off first.” She bent down and sucked him deep into her mouth.

This was the way to wake up. His eyes closed, he savored the feel of her hot mouth and soft hand milking his cock. “I have faith in you, honey.” He stretched out his arm and grabbed her leg, wanting to pull her closer so he could get to her, too. She scooted back and pulled his cock out of her mouth. “Nope. Just for you this morning. Don’t have much time. You need to focus.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He crossed his arms behind his head, closed his eyes, and focused. He didn’t try to control his body; he just felt. Fuck, it was good. He lifted his head and looked down his torso, watching her head bobbing around his cock. He would never, ever, get sick of seeing that. He reached down with one hand and grabbed a fistful of wild, wavy black hair. Sexiest thing on seven continents. He groaned as the pressure built in his gut. “Honey—do that thing?”

Without stopping her movements, she looked at him out of the corner of her eye and grinned around his cock. Then—*oh, fuck, yeah*—she circled the base of his balls with her thumb and forefinger and squeezed. He went off immediately, with a strangled shout, his whole body stiff, his toes curling.

And then the alarm went off. She pulled away, daintily wiping her mouth. “Just made it. Well done!”

As soon as his head was clear, he got up and went to take a shower; Vivian was already in the kitchen, packing Hope’s lunch and making breakfast.

He came into the kitchen as Vivian set a plate of eggs and sausage down for him with a mug of coffee. Hope was at the table, pouting over her blueberry pancakes. Bugged the shit out of him that Vivian made special food for Hope instead of insisting she eat what everyone else was eating. He saw Vivian scrape scrambled eggs from a small plate to a larger one, add a sausage patty and a piece of pumpernickel toast, and bring it to the table with her coffee, and he knew exactly what happened. Vivian had made eggs. Hope had balked, and Vivian had then made *blueberry pancakes* just for the kid. And now his old lady was eating their daughter’s cold leavings, and Hope was pouting over her special request breakfast.

Pissed him off to high hell, but he wasn't about to start a fight, not after the wake-up he'd gotten. Besides, he'd lost the food fight months ago, when Hope had picked up this fucking annoying trait.

“Why the long puss, midget?”

She just huffed, a little flourish to her pout. So he went back to his breakfast. He had no time for histrionic bullshit, not from anyone. Vivian ignored her, too—which meant that she was pissed off as well. Probably because the pancakes were getting cold. “You have a long day today, Hap, or you think you'll be around for dinner?”

“Far as I know, things are quiet, so I'll probably be home. Hey—you want to go out? I'll grab a Prospect to watch the kid.”

While they were talking, Hope was making a louder and louder fuss—sighing, kicking her shoes against her chair, hitting her fork on her plate—trying and failing to get their attention.

Barely concealing her smile, Vivian said, “Oh, that would be great. Maybe down to the Lamplighter? Good music tonight.”

“*I HATE SCHOOL!*” Hope sat back with her arms crossed, a scowl firmly planted on her face.

Hap met Vivian's eyes; her look said, *Yep. What else would it be?* Hope's distaste for school started day one of kindergarten, and first grade wasn't going any better. She was whip-smart, got concepts the first time they were introduced and got bored immediately thereafter. She was the first one in her class to learn anything, the first one to finish any work. But a bored Hope was a troublesome Hope. She was top of her grade in two areas: academics and referrals to the principal. Fuck, she was top of the *school* in the second one, at least since Abel had moved on to the middle school.

Moreover, she was a loner, who thought kids her age were “stupid.” Watching Hope try to integrate with “normal” kids, when she spent her time away from school surrounded by bikers and their women—it made Hap angry and sad all at once. His little girl was a fucking miracle. He hated to see her so isolated. But he didn't know what to do about it.

They'd made a single abortive attempt to help by becoming part of the school community themselves. Vivian had dragged him to one PTA meeting. They were all very lucky it hadn't turned into a bloodbath. Jesus, he hated prissy middle-class know-it-alls in their khakis and polo shirts.

No mystery where Hope got it, he supposed.

Now he turned to his daughter and leaned over the table, getting to her level. “I know, midget. I know. I'm sorry about that. You gotta go, though, and you gotta try to be

good.” It galled him even to say the words, but they were true. She was going to have to figure shit like this out.

Hope looked him in the eye; he could see that she was weighing her options. Finally she sighed and dropped her arms. She looked dejected, but there would be no explosion this morning. Good. “Now, eat the breakfast your mom made you special, and I’ll give you a ride to school.”

Vivian looked up at that, her eyes flaring, but she didn’t say anything. She thought six was too young to be on the back of a bike, but that was a fight *he’d* won. Usually, though, he gave her more warning, so she could get her head around it.

On the other hand, Hope’s whole demeanor changed in an instant. She’d do just about anything for a ride on his Dyna. A big smile on her previously pouty lips, she dug into her pancakes eagerly.

When he pulled up to the school, he held out his arm for her, and she grabbed it and swung off the bike to the ground. She handed him her helmet—“Bye, Daddy!”—and ran off toward the building.

He saw the looks from other parents dropping off their kids. He sent his own brand of look back, and felt a sour satisfaction when they turned awkwardly away.

-oOo-

His registered cell rang as he was coming back into the Charming town limits from a quick club errand a week or so later. He pulled to the curb and pulled it out of his kutte. Vivian.

“Hey, honey. Just getting back.”

Vivian’s voice was tense and direct. “The school called. Your daughter’s on the loose again.”

“Fuck. Okay, I got her.” He hung up; there was no point in continuing. He knew how angry Vivian was at him just then.

Hope had taken to running away from school—if she thought she’d gotten in trouble unfairly, or if she’d thought some lesson had been particularly stupid. The first time, the third day of first grade, the Sons, the cops, and the school had conducted a frantic search. Vivian and Hap had both held it together, but barely. Tig had found her swinging on a swing in some backyard several blocks from the school. She’d been trying to walk to T-M but had lost her way. Instead of panicking, she’d simply found a place to play and waited for somebody to find her.

Six weeks later, she'd run again, and again a search had been undertaken. This time, Hap had found her, again trying and failing to get to the clubhouse.

So he'd shown her the way.

He'd sat down with her and drawn a map from school to T-M, and then they'd walked the route together, going carefully over the rules about stoplights and street crossings. It was just over two miles. He and Vivian had fought hard about it; she thought he was giving permission for Hope to run away. He just wanted her to be safe. If she ran and took the route, they wouldn't need a search party to find her. He understood why she ran. He understood it well. He knew that short of shackling her to a desk—and he'd gut anyone who tried anything like that—she was going to run. Until she figured out how to deal with school, she was going to run. So he wanted her safe when she did it.

She'd run three more times—counting this time, four. Just about once a month or so. Except for one time, when he was out on a run and Vivian went instead, Hap always went to find her. Then he'd take her for a ride, out to Frank and Juice's place, and they'd talk it out.

Frank and Juice had a nice place in the rural area just outside of town. About 20 acres, with an orchard and woods with a little creek. Hap had never been much of an outdoorsy guy, but he'd walked around out there a few times, and it was pretty. Quiet. There was a rock outcropping that sort of hung over the creek at a narrow, rocky point, so the water burred and bubbled. Without much of a plan for it, he'd ended up out there with Hope the third time she ran. They'd had a good talk, and that spot had just become their place.

He didn't even try to talk to her until they were sitting on that outcropping, side by side. Then he took her little hand. "Okay, Hope. What happened this time?"

Hope tossed a loose rock over the side and watched it land in the water. Then she took a big breath and said, "Tommy Benedict was running around grabbing all the girls and kissing us. I didn't like it. So I kicked him in his penis. Then he was screaming and had to go to the nurse. And I have to sit in the chair in Ms. Evers' office for recess all week. Tommy didn't get in trouble at all, but I didn't want his gross lips on me."

Hap's first reaction was button-popping pride, and he almost laughed out loud. But he restrained himself, and gave Hope a serious, reflective look as he considered that 1) Ms. Evers would be sitting down with him this very afternoon, because that was fucked up. 2) Tommy Benedict's parents would also be meeting him this day. 3) He had no idea how to advise Hope now, because as far as he was concerned she let the little asshole off easy.

Finally, he pulled her onto his lap. "Here's the deal, midge. Anytime someone lays hands—or lips, or any other part—on you and you don't want them too, you stop 'em. I'm not gonna tell you different. I don't think you did wrong kicking that boy, and I'll back you on that." Hope looked up at him, relieved. But he wasn't done.

“You have to stop running, though. I know school is hard on you. I wish I could make it different. But it’s what you have to do. We gotta take care of business, right?” She nodded soberly. “School’s your business. The learning part is easy for you, and that’s good. Now you have to learn how to stay put. Running is for pussies. Are you a pussy?”

“No, Daddy.”

“No, you’re not. You’re my girl. You’re tough. Right?” She nodded again. “Good. You got a problem you can’t handle, and I got your back. You tell me, tell your mom. We’ll help. But you don’t run. You face up. Got it? No more of this.”

She leaned against his chest, and he put his arms around her. “Nobody likes me there, Daddy.”

His heart ached at that—how could it not? Hap loved his daughter in a way he’d never known existed. Her very presence on the earth was a fucking *miracle*. She was smart and talented and funny. For the most part, she was the very best of Vivian and him. But her personality was too much him and not enough Vivian. Vivian was an extrovert, gregarious and lively. She was quieter than she’d once been, but she knew how to get along with almost anyone. Hap was the polar opposite—not shy at all, but he had little use for most people. Vivian was patient and forgiving. He was quick-tempered and rigid.

Hap had struggled in school in exactly the same way, and school had gone badly for him to its bitter end, when he dropped out in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. By then, he’d found a world where he did fit in. When, years later, at the urging of the Sons but for no other reason he’d ever figured out, he’d gone for his GED, he’d landed a perfect score.

“Aw, midge. They’re missing out. The people who matter love you. You’ll always be able to tell who’s worth your time, because they’ll be the people who love you like you are. Nobody else matters.”

After he got Hope home, Hap went and straightened out the principal and the little wannabe rapist’s khaki-clad parents. Hope was no longer restricted to the principal’s office, and little Tommy Benedict, Hap was certain, wouldn’t be putting his lips on anybody for a very long time.

-oOo-

That night, long after Hope was asleep, Hap and Vivian were curled together in bed, talking through their day. Hap had just finished telling her the story of his talk with Hope. Lacing her fingers with his, Vivian said, “You know you’re giving her exactly what she wants. She runs away, and you reward her with a bike ride with Daddy out to Aunt Frank’s woods.”

“You don’t get it, honey. What school is like when everybody sees you as the problem. I want to get her out of there.”

“And she’ll go where, then? We can’t afford private school—and that wouldn’t be better, anyway. Part of school is learning how to be with people. I’m glad she kicked that little creep, too, but she’s also got to learn that she can’t just act out whenever she wants to. A lot of the reason nobody likes her is that she doesn’t like anybody.”

He knew that was true. Hope had no patience for children her age, and she didn’t like to do most of the things they did. She didn’t like TV, except to play video games with Frank and Juice—but she didn’t play the games other six-year-olds were playing. She played the violent games Frank and Juice played. She hated girly toys and didn’t even know the names of the Disney princesses.

Hap sighed and rolled to his back. “Fuck, honey. It shouldn’t be so goddamn hard to keep a six-year-old happy and safe.”

Vivian rolled over and tucked herself under his arm, pillowing her head on his chest. He kissed her head. “She’s a club kid, Hap. Nothing in her life is normal. Until there’s a school for the kids of outlaws, she’s going to have to learn how to get along in a world that doesn’t understand her. No way around it.”

Hap wished he could save his daughter the frustration and discontent that he knew awaited her.

## 9. Club Christmas

Hap came into the house from the driveway. He needed to head back out on a late-night run, so he didn't bother with the garage. Club business was heavy again. They were up to their necks lately, and things had been getting bloody. He'd been circumspect with Vivian about a lot of it, not wanting to worry her. He'd once vastly preferred the hot times. Paydays were big, and the danger kept his blood up and his senses keen. But he was getting fucking old, well past 50. Closer to 60, in fact. He had a wife and an eight-year-old daughter. Getting a gun shoved in his mug wasn't exciting the way it once had been. He still got the job done, still had his edge—but he didn't relish it like he used to.

The house was quiet—not even Tigger around—but he'd pulled his bike up alongside Vivian's SUV. He had a moment's concern, then his eye caught lights in the window over the sink. He looked out and saw Vivian in the music room—a small room attached to the back of the garage that they'd tricked out to hold her instruments and gear. She wrote back there, too. She made good bank as a songwriter these days, a hired gun for other, more famous, but in Hap's estimation considerably lesser, talent.

When he met her, she'd been aiming for her dream of making it big with Leather, her own band, but that dream had been dashed, in no small part because she'd met him. Now, she played occasional solo gigs around town mainly for fun, and made her living writing to spec. She used to guest with her old band when they were nearby, too, but they'd finally broken up a couple of years ago when Oscar, the lead guitarist and the one who'd replaced her as vocalist, actually did make it as a solo act. Hap hated that fucker.

She had accepted the transition from stage to garage room fairly easily, and he knew she loved the life they'd made together, but Hap saw the hunger in her eyes when she saw a story about Oscar, or when she saw or heard someone else sing her words.

They'd moved her grandfather's baby grand piano into the music room when they'd sold her Berkeley apartment years ago. She'd never been much of a piano player—guitar was her instrument—but the piano had had high sentimental value, and she couldn't part with it. At some point, she'd started plinking on it more, and as far as Hap could tell, she'd gotten really good. Sounded great to him, anyway.

Hap stood at the sink and looked through the windows at his old lady, sitting at her Pops' piano. He couldn't hear—the weather had been particularly chilly this December, and the windows were closed up tight—but he knew what was going on. It had been going on for a couple of weeks now, and he was seriously tempted to just head right on back out to his bike and ride to the clubhouse. Because Vivian was back there with their daughter, and Hope was practicing for the Charming Elementary School Christmas Pageant. She was singing a solo, the pageant was in just over a week, and she'd been a nervous wreck and about unbearable.

This was one of those times—like so many others—when he was not the right parent for the job. He didn't have the patience for her temper, and was as likely to enflame it as he was to help her control it. Vivian stayed steady, and got control much faster.

Hope wasn't a brat, but she was high strung. She was only eight, but she took shit seriously, and she hated getting things wrong. She rarely did, when she wanted to get it right, and that just made the times she got things wrong even worse. Her worry about getting things wrong in front of an audience was making these little rehearsal sessions nightmarish for everyone in the vicinity. She had a sweet voice, and Vivian was teaching her how to read music, but she'd been having trouble with the words, and every miss was a meltdown.

The song she'd been assigned to sing was "Good King Wenceslas"—Hap hadn't even known what the hell it was until he'd heard Vivian play it, and then he recognized the tune. When he saw the lyrics, he was shocked. Who the hell asks an eight-year-old to sing a song like that alone? What about Rudolph, or Jingle Bells, or some shit like that?

He'd wanted to go to the school and make the music teacher pick a different song for Hope, but Hope had a fucking meltdown about that, too, afraid the teacher would think she couldn't do it. He had a good mind to find that son of a bitch in back of the school one night and put an end to the problem once and for all.

But he didn't. School had been going very slightly better this year, and her father killing the music teacher might screw that up. Hope still didn't have any school friends, but her regular third grade teacher seemed to see her as a smart, curious little girl who wasn't a problem as long as she had interesting things to challenge her. Hope wanted to please Mrs. Percini, and that was a first.

So Vivian was working to help Hope get the fucking song down. He should go out there and at least say hi, give everybody a couple of minutes' break. Maybe see if there was any chance he could get dinner tonight.

He should tread carefully asking about that, though.

With a sigh, he went out back and walked to the music room. He could hear the piano and Hope's pretty little voice—and then a shriek of frustration and something crashing. Yeah. Clubhouse was looking pretty good right about now.

Tigger was lying outside, his body across the doorway. He whined when Hap came up, his tail thumping. "Hey, bud. Too hot in there for ya, huh? S'okay. You can keep watch out here." He stepped over the dog and went into the music room. "How're my girls tonight?"

Vivian smiled when she saw him. "Hey, Hap." He leaned down and kissed her, his hand on the back of her head. She looked worn out. Hap decided not to mention wanting dinner. He'd grab something on the way back to the clubhouse.

Hope was picking up the music stand that she'd obviously knocked over. She hadn't said hi, which was unusual. She was deep in the middle of a sulk, though. Not all that unusual. "Hey midget, I heard you when I was walking up. You sound good." He picked her up and gave her a kiss.

"I suck, Daddy. I can't say Wenes—Wenes—Wen—. I can't say it." She dropped her head on his shoulder.

"You don't suck. I don't want you ever talkin' like that. It's a hard word. Just do your best." He really wanted to kick some music teacher ass. He put her down.

Vivian gestured for Hope to come over to her, and Hope went and got into her lap. Vivian smiled at him. "You still going back out tonight?" At his nod, she asked, "Should I put something together for you to eat first?"

"Honey, don't worry about it. Not that hungry—I'll grab something on the road." He was starving, but one look at his wife's relief told him he'd made the right call. Not only did he not get yelled at for bringing it up first, but he was getting credit for not taking her up when she offered. Good husbanding there. He was feeling a little cocky about the whole thing.

Now Vivian turned to Hope. "Enough singing for tonight, don't you think?" Hope nodded. "I have an idea. Since Daddy's going back out, and it's just going to be us, why don't we have ice cream sundaes and make a blanket fort. We can read by flashlight and freak Tigger out with shadow puppets." Hope had not stopped nodding since the words "ice cream." Vivian lifted her off her lap, stood and closed the lid over the piano keys.

As soon as Hope jumped over Tigger, the dog got up from his spot across the doorway—more slowly these days; he was nine years old—and trotted after his girl. Hap pulled Vivian back as she moved toward the door herself. "C'mere." He kissed her breathless. "You're a good mom." She smiled and led him by the hand back to the house.

-oOo-

The day of the pageant, the Sons had been in a pitched gunfight. They'd made it back whole, more or less. Phil had taken one in the arm, but it had gone clean through, and Tara had taken care of it in under 30 minutes. After the debrief at the table, Hap headed straight through the barroom for the lot. He'd already called and told Vivian he'd have to meet them at the school, but he wasn't going to miss his kid's thing.

The rest of the Sons made for the bar. Bobby noticed that Hap went right by and called out, "Hap—where you off to in such a hurry?"

"Hope's got a thing at school—Christmas thing. She's singing. Gotta get there."

Jax turned around. “Hope’s singing? Why didn’t you say anything, bro? We should be there.”

Hap shook his head. “I don’t think she’d like it if everybody was there.”

Tig stood. “That’s crazy. We’re coming.” And they did. The whole club, even Phil, strode back out to the lot, forgoing booze and booty in favor of two hours sitting in folding metal chairs, listening to children singing Christmas carols badly. They took up a whole row near the front, all lined up in their kuttes, Frank and Vivian on the end. Vivian was recording with her phone.

When it came time for Hope to sing, she stood alone downstage while the rest of the students stood on risers behind her, holding props from the song. She got through it. She started off quiet and hesitant, and she still didn’t manage to say “Wenceslas,” but as she sang she gained confidence, and she sounded good. Hap was proud. When she sang her last note, she made a little bow, and all the Sons stood and cheered. Taking a cue from the row of cheering Sons, the rest of the crowd stood, too.

Looking down over her first standing ovation, Hope beamed.

-oOo-

After Christmas dinner, while most of the Sons were drinking inside and most of the women were doing whatever the fuck women did in the kitchen all night, Hap stood on the back deck of Jax and Tara’s house, smoking and watching Hope and Thomas race the remote-control trucks they’d both gotten for Christmas. The boy was four years older than Hope, but he was patient and kind, and was easily the best friend she had.

Abel, on the other hand, at fourteen, was a sullen asshole. He’d been a sweet little kid, but by the time he’d hit school age, he’d thought his shit smelled like flowers. More than once, Hap had taken serious stock of the pros and cons of punching the club President’s teenage son in the face. Kid knew better than to openly disrespect any patch or old lady, but he walked a fine line, and he’d made a Crow Eater cry tonight, right at the table. Hap didn’t usually pay any mind to an ‘Eater’s feelings, but he didn’t like what Abel, clearly being groomed for a patch one day, meant for the future of the Sons if he didn’t shape up. Luckily, he knew that Jax saw it, too.

Hap stood now and watched Thomas show Hope how to make her truck do donuts and peel out. When she got hers to do it without turning over, Thomas bumped fists with her. Hap chuckled. The thought occurred to him that those two might be a pretty good fit some day.

He heard the sliding door open behind him and looked over his shoulder to see Frank coming out. “Hey, little girl. Tired of the hen party?”

She laughed. “Yeah. I’ll never understand the appeal of standing around the kitchen island pretending to be helping. But it’s not like you boys are any better, sitting around getting wasted and scratching yourselves. Really kills the biker mystique, gotta say.” She watched Hope and Thomas for a couple of minutes. “So, you missed Abel apologizing to Gina.”

“Who’s Gina?”

Frank rolled her eyes. “Geez, Happy. The girl he was so shitty to at dinner? She’s been around for like three years.”

Hap shrugged. He barely noticed ‘Eaters. He’d barely noticed them when he was fucking them. Now, as long as they kept his glass full, and weren’t weeping into the mashed potatoes at Christmas dinner, they might as well be invisible. “How’d that happen?”

“Not sure, but I got the impression that Jax and Tara had a moment with their boy.”

He nodded and took a drag on his smoke, but he didn’t say anything. Frank stood next to him, and they watched the kids playing.

After a few minutes, Frank cleared her throat. “Those two are good kids. I hope mine turns out like them.”

It took a second for him to really hear what she’d said. Then, once it occurred to him, he doubted his ears. He turned and looked down into her upturned face. “Little girl?”

Her smile was wry. “Yep. Got a bun.”

He dropped his smoke and toed it out. “Well, shit. Thought you swore that wasn’t gonna happen.”

“Yeah, well. I haven’t gone respectably crazy in a long time, so that excuse dried up. And it’s your fault, really. I figure if you can do it, how hard can it really be?”

He pulled her in for a hug and kissed the top of her head. “You’re gonna be a great mom. Kid’s lucky.”

“We’ll see. You and Viv owe us like *years* worth of babysitting, by the way. We’ll be collecting—I did the numbers, and I figure I’ll just drop the kid off on the way home from the hospital and come back when he’s out of diapers.”

“He?”

“Or she, whatever. ‘It’ sounds weird.” She looked out and nodded toward the yard. Hope and Thomas were racing their cars around to the front of the house. “You know, we’ve had some interesting chats out on this deck.”

Hap nodded. She'd asked him to walk her down the aisle out here. "We have."

As they went back into the house, Frank swung her narrow little hip out, connecting with his thigh. "I'm totally gonna start calling you Grampy. Just a heads up."

## 10. Visiting Day

Hap walked into the Visitor Center and saw Vivian immediately—and Hope, too. Goddammit. He'd told Vivian to leave their daughter at home. *Goddammit*. He didn't want her seeing him like this anymore. Especially not right now. It wasn't good for her.

But then she saw him and jumped up, yelling “Daddy!”

His heart broke. Again. Vivian grabbed her arm before she could run to him. Making eye contact with the guard first, he turned and crossed the room to his family. As he arrived at the table, Vivian let Hope loose, and his daughter grabbed him around the legs. He squatted down to her level and hugged her hard. “Hey, midget. Love you.”

“I love you, Daddy. What happened to your face?” She put her hand on the long, healing scar across his cheek.

He set her back and stood up before the guards could get antsy. “Just clumsy, midge. I'm okay.”

Now Vivian was walking toward him. “Hey, Hap.”

“Hey, honey.” Fuck, she was so gorgeous. He dreamt all night, every night about that wild black hair, those deep black eyes, that smile. Those perfect fucking tits. He was hard before she touched him. He enfolded her in his arms and kissed her, his tongue pushing into her mouth. She resisted at first—this was not prison-approved contact—but then she responded, and he felt her tongue run along his. Christ.

“Lowman!” At the guard's shout, Hap reluctantly released her and stepped back, panting. He turned to the guard, who gave him a warning look but did not interfere further, and Hap sat down with his family. He took his wife's hand—he'd keep hold of it as much as he could throughout the hours of this visit—and turned to his daughter. With his other hand, he pulled her close. At nine, she was getting too big for his lap, but the guards would let him have more contact with his child than they would with his wife, so he brought her right up next to him.

“How you doin', midge? How's school?”

Hope shrugged. “S'okay. Mom let me get a new game because I went four weeks without going to the office.”

He looked at Vivian, who smiled and nodded. That was real progress. “Good girl. That's great! What game did you get?” She told him the name of some video game; he couldn't keep track of which ones were which, especially not from in here. Her taste in games, influenced by Frank and Juice, as well as Abel and Thomas and some of the younger Sons and Prospects, was . . . mature, to put it mildly. But he listened while she told him

the whole story of the game, the things she had to kill, and what was hard and what was easy. When that topic petered out, he asked, “What else is going on?”

“There’s a new girl in my class. She sat with me at lunchtime.” Hope usually sat alone, and she’d never spoken of a schoolmate except to complain, so this was news.

“Oh, yeah? Tell me about her.” Vivian was quiet, listening and watching Hap and their daughter; he could feel her eyes on him. She shifted her hand in his and laced their fingers together, and he rubbed his thumb along her hand. He squirmed a little in his seat, trying to adjust without drawing attention. Since he’d been inside—the first time he’d ever been inside when someone was waiting for him—handholding had become a fucking intense sexual experience. If the guards noticed he was worked up, though, they’d end the visit.

“Her name is Darcy. She’s okay. She likes to draw. She gets picked on, though. Tommy called her lardass in gym.” Hope was looking around the room as she talked. Hap did, too, trying to see through a 4<sup>th</sup>-grader’s eyes. Lot of scary looking people in here. Hope was being raised around scary looking people, of course. But this room was fucking depressing. He hated her being here. This is not something she should know. Christ, he was a terrible father.

He returned his attention to his daughter. “Tommy’s still a jerk, huh?”

Hope nodded. “Mom called him a tiny prick. I didn’t know what that was, so I googled it. I bet he has a tiny prick.”

Laughing, Hap kissed Hope’s head and looked at his wife, who was grinning broadly. “Between the Sons and Google, there’s no point in pretending she’s going to grow up sweet and innocent, Hap.”

She didn’t mean anything critical by it, he knew, but it struck him hard, anyway. No, his daughter was being raised into a hard life. No chance for sweetness and innocence. Or even friendship. There weren’t many club kids—Abel and Thomas, Hope, and now Frank and Juice’s boy. Chibs had a girl right about Thomas’s age, but he mostly kept his family away from the club, and nobody saw them much. Abel and Thomas were a lot older than Hope, and Leo—whom Hap hadn’t even seen yet—was just a baby. His girl was alone, and she was unlike any children her age she knew. Add to that her complicated personality, and she had no chance.

And now her dad was doing a five to ten stint. Real time. Pled down to manslaughter from a murder two rap, but still, real time. There was every chance he’d still be in here when she graduated high school. He’d been working on getting time off for good behavior—and the club had been working it from the outside too—and he’d held his temper for almost a year. But then he’d been attacked in the yard and had retaliated. Unable to shut the rage down, he’d fought the guards who brought him down, and he’d

ended up in the hole for a month. Now he was thinking he'd be lucky to get parole when the five came up.

Vivian knew. She was acting like she always did at a visit, but he knew she was angry. He'd fucked everything up. He'd been denied visitation in solitary, and had gotten word to her through his attorney about what happened and to keep Hope away. But here she was, his first visit back, and Hope was with her.

They talked mainly with Hope throughout the morning. They played some board games, too. He didn't give a cheap fuck what they did, as long as he could have them close. Even though he didn't want Hope in this hellhole, he couldn't be sorry now that she was here. His girl. Who looked so much like her mother and acted so much like him.

Around noon, Vivian bought some sandwiches and sodas from the vending machines, and they went out to a picnic table on the patio and yard area just off the visiting room. While they ate, Vivian brought out a small stack of photos. He set his crappy sandwich aside and examined each photo carefully. Hope and Tigger on the living room floor, Hope playing a video game, Tigger with his head in her lap. Hope singing at some school thing.

Three fucking beautiful photos of his girls—one of Hope and Vivian, and one of each alone. They looked professionally done, but they weren't cheap department store studio shots. He looked up at her. "Friend of Frank's. He took some of Frank, Juice, and Leo"—she nodded at the stack—"and I asked him to take some of us. I'll mail them to you, if you like them."

He wasn't allowed to keep anything a visitor brought, but he could get them in the mail. "I fuckin' love them, Vivian. You know I'm gonna jack off to this." He indicated the photo of her alone, and she smiled. It wasn't an intentionally sexy shot. She was totally dressed, wearing a plain, light blue sleeveless dress. She was backlit in diffuse sunlight, looking out their living room window. It was the sexiest goddamn thing Hap had ever seen.

He cleared his throat and flipped to the last photo: Frank, holding a baby. Leo. Frank hadn't been to visit yet. She'd been pregnant when he went in, and things had been hard for her. She was so fucking little. But he called her regularly, and she'd sent him some photos right after the kid was born. She was doing good. She liked being a mom—he'd known she would.

"That Leo? He's what, three months now?"

"Almost four. Got his coloring and her eyes—that combination is going to be no end of trouble some day. He's a sweet little guy. Really quiet, hardly ever cries."

Hope had been listening quietly; now she piped up. "He's pretty fun. Frank lets me help."

He tousled her hair. “She does, huh? Change any diapers?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, Daddy! Gross!”

He laughed. Turning back to Vivian, he asked, “She don’t have you babysitting, though, right?” Not right to ask an old lady for favors when her old man was inside.

“I want to—I had to insist. It’s nice to have him around. She needs the help, too, since she had to get back to the shop. She takes him there most days, anyway, so I only have him a couple times a week. Oh—I guess you haven’t talked to her yet, since—” She stopped, but he knew what she hadn’t said. Since the hole.

“No chance yet. Somethin’ wrong?”

“No. Just—her brother’s back. She should tell you what that’s about, though.”

“Tell me. She knows you would.” Frank’s brother had turned his back on her years ago—before Hope was born, so a decade or better—and had hurt her badly. Didn’t thrill him to know that son of a bitch was anywhere near her.

Vivian looked at Hope. “Baby, how about you go play on the swings for a while so I can tell Daddy some grownup things.” Hope finished her juice and did as she was told. Club kids know that when there’s grownup stuff to be discussed, they have no choice but to go. Hap watched her. There were three kids at the swings already, leaving one empty swing. Hope got on it. All four kids swung as if they were alone, swinging on a rusty swingset in a patch of scrubby dirt.

Christ. What kind of life had he made for his child? He was no better than his father.

He closed his eyes and took a breath, then turned back to his old lady, his eyebrows raised. She picked her story up. “Well, I guess he got a divorce and wants to move back to Charming. The club gave him some trouble, and Frank didn’t want to see him. It was a thing for a week or so. Frank finally saw him, but I didn’t pry about how that went. Anyway, Juice was having fits.”

Of course he was. That skinny asshole had hurt Frank. Really broke her heart. Nobody just walks back in from that and picks up where he left off. He’d have to get through a wall of Sons before he’d even have the chance to hurt her again.

“What about his kid—he has a boy, probably, what, 11 by now, maybe 12? Frank loved that kid.”

“Ex has the kid. It was just her brother.”

“That’s bullshit. You don’t keep a man from his kid.”

Vivian stared at him. “Unless that’s what he wants, you mean.” She wasn’t talking about Frank’s brother any longer.

“This is different, Vivian. This is no goddamn place for a kid. Fuck, look around you!” He’d raised his voice, and Vivian squeezed his hand. Yelling would end the visit, too.

Vivian replied in a whisper, but the anger and weight of her words was clear, and they tore at him, heart and soul. “You’re right, Hap. It’s a terrible place. No question. I’m sad for days after I leave here each time. And you know what? So is she. But it’s where you are. It’s where you’re going to be for the next who knows how long. Do you want your daughter to grow up not seeing you? You think that’s fucking better? This is where you are. You are her father.”

The backs of his eyes were on fire, and he blinked rapidly and breathed, trying to calm himself. “She needs a better one. I drag her down. I drag you down, too.”

“What, is this *self-pity*? From you? You turning pussy on me, Lowman?”

His temper was getting the better of him. He squeezed her hand hard, trying to keep it together. He couldn’t lose his shit here. He was on thin enough ice as it was. He didn’t want Hope to see him in this place, but he’d fucking shiv himself if he lost contact visitation with Vivian. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a guard taking note of them—they were telecasting the fight through their body language. With an effort, he sat back and forced himself down.

“It’s not self-pity, Vivian. It’s fact. Look at her over there. Alone. You know that’s me. That’s what the life is doing to her. It’s wrong.”

She laced fingers with him again. “Hap. All we’ve been through, the one constant has been that we belong together. In the dark time, it was you saying it loudest. We belong together. This is our life. Right and wrong doesn’t factor. It’s the life we have. We brought a child into it. Lord, think how we fought to have her. You turning your back on her doesn’t help her. You *know* that. There’s no spin that makes it good for her. Yes, it’s terrible to see you here. But it would be so much worse not to see you at all.”

She reached out and almost touched the fresh scar on his face, but he pulled back, and she dropped her hand. They were walking a fine line today with inappropriate contact. He still had two hours with them, and he wanted every second. “She misses you every day, Hap. She needs to see you whenever she can. Until you’re out, that means she sees you here. I will not leave her at home. The only way you can avoid her is to refuse her. You want to do that to your girl?”

The itch behind his eyes was back, and he felt a tremor run through his body. He closed his eyes and waited for it to pass. He took a shaky breath. “Fuck, Vivian, I’m so sorry. I’m so goddamn sorry.”

“I know, Hap. I know. Just get home. Please—be safe, behave, and get home. We need you.” She squeezed his hand again. “In the meantime, we’ll be here every day they’ll let us.”

## 11. Coming Home

Hap processed out and came through the fenced walkway to exit the prison. His whole club was arrayed at the end of the chute. He could see his Dyna, parked right in front of the gate, polished to a high gleam, his kutte laying over the seat.

4 years, 5 months, 13 days. Much less time than he'd feared, but a hard stint nonetheless.

As MC President, Jax was first to greet him; he grabbed Hap's arm and pulled him into a hug. Tig was right behind him. "Good to see you, man. Missed your ugly mug." Then Juice. All the Sons took their turn, including two who'd been Prospects when he went in. Abel was driving the van, wearing a prospect kutte. Nineteen was young to be prospecting, but he was the prince. Hap hoped there had been some improvement in the boy's attitude in the past four and a half years. If not, well, he was a Prospect now. Hap could see that he worked on it.

Then Tig handed him his kutte.

He simply held it for a moment, letting its weight fill his hands, feeling the softly worn, pebbled leather, warm from the sun, between his fingers. The smell—so familiar, yet strange now, after so long. Home—no. More than that. *Him*. Who he was. That's what he was holding. Nearly overcome with emotion, he closed his eyes.

Into his reverie came Tig's voice. "C'mon, man. You gonna wear it or fuck it?" His brothers laughed. He managed a smile as he looked around at the men who'd come to take him home. None of them had done the time he'd just done. None of them knew.

-oOo-

His heart was pounding when they all pulled into the T-M lot. No—he saw the new sign. Teller Automotive. The last trace of Clay Morrow gone. He looked over to the clubhouse. A crowd had formed—a big party was customary to welcome a Son home from a stint. Hap was in no mood for a party. He scanned the faces at the front of the crowd and saw his family, front and center. He'd seen them only three weeks ago, but right now, in his kutte, mounted on his Dyna, he felt like he hadn't seen them since he went in.

It hadn't been him they'd been visiting. Not really. Not fully.

Vivian had dressed for him. Leather pants. Boots. A flowy, low-cut halter top. Holy shit. Hope was standing next to her—almost as tall as her mother now, at 13. She was going to be tall. He didn't know why he was surprised. She'd seemed smaller, though, visiting him.

Frank was with them, his honorary daughter. His little girl. She held the hand of a small boy who was 4 years old now, or would be very soon, with bronze skin and dark hair. Leo. He'd seen him grow up in photographs. Frank had brought him for a few visits, but

she agreed with Hap that prison was no place to bring a child, so he had missed the chance to be Leo's Grampy. He would have liked that. Now, he'd just be Uncle Happy, like any other brother, except that Leo didn't know him like he knew the others. Not yet.

He kicked the stand down and dismounted. He saw Hope say something to her mother, who nodded. Then Hope came to him first, walking quickly, almost skipping.

"Hi, Daddy." She walked right into his arms, and he squeezed her tight, lifting her off her feet a little.

"Hey, midget. Love you."

"I love you, Daddy. I'm glad you're home."

"Oh, midge. Me too. Me too." He set her down and looked closely at her, brushing her wild black hair from her clear, sweet face. "You're a beauty, you know."

She blushed. "Daddy! That's weird."

He laughed. "Sorry."

She kissed his cheek. "I know you and Mom want to boink, so don't mind me. I'll hang out with you later."

"Hope!"

"What? You do, right? Daddy, I know about that stuff. It's okay. Gross, but okay. And everybody's been making jokes about it around here all day, anyway."

Fucking cavemen. Shaking his head, he grabbed his daughter's hand and walked the rest of the way across the lot, where his wife was waiting for him. She hadn't moved, had waited patiently for him and their daughter to have their reunion.

Hope wriggled her hand free of his as they neared Vivian, and he didn't see where she went. He only saw his wife. She was smiling, but as he got to her, she nodded to her right—to Frank and Leo. With a nod back, he smiled and turned toward them instead.

Frank took a step back. "Oh, hey—no! I'm not getting in the middle of the big reunion scene, no way. There were, like, violins crescendoing or something there."

Hap grinned at her and dropped to a squat in front of Leo. He held out his hand. "Hey, Leo. Remember me?"

Leo stepped back behind his mother's legs and peered at him from around her hip. Ouch.

Frank turned and squatted next to her son, encouraging him not to be shy, but Hap stood, pulling her up with him. “It’s okay, little girl. There’s time. We’ll get to know each other.”

“Sorry, Happy. Well, I’m glad you’re back, anyway.” He pulled her close and gave her a squeeze. She squeezed him back, hard, for a few seconds, then squirmed out of his arms. “But seriously, you’re putting off the good stuff here, and I’m getting out of the way of that right now!” She stepped back and hoisted Leo into her arms.

Hap turned to his old lady. She said, almost a whisper, “Hey, Hap.”

“Hey, honey.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Four years, five months, and thirteen days of real passion, real contact in that one kiss. Her arms came around his neck and pulled him closer, and he dropped his hands to her waist, then slid them under her top. Jesus, the feel of her bare skin was going to set him off. He broke the kiss with a groan. He couldn’t wait, not another minute. He was about to have her on the damn picnic table, surrounded by people. “Vivian, I can’t—”

She took his hand. “Come on, Hap. I’ve got something for you.” She led him into the clubhouse to a chorus of wolf whistles and catcalls. He barely heard any of it.

She led him through the barroom and down the hall to the apartment. She led him in, then closed and locked the door. He looked around the room. The bed was made nicely—good sheets, big pillows, a nice comforter. Not the flophouse aesthetic he remembered.

Vivian pushed him against the door and pulled his head back down for another kiss, her tongue probing his mouth. Fuck. He pulled away, panting, dizzy. “Vivian, I just need—.” Again, he couldn’t finish his sentence. He needed so much. She grinned at him.

And then she dropped to her knees at his feet and opened his belt. He was going to come at the mere *idea* of her mouth on him. “Fuck. Fuck, honey. Oh, God.” Her hand was on him, and he slammed his palms back against the door, trying for some kind of control. He hit the back of her throat in one long suck, and he went off like a shot. “Ah FUCK! FUCK!” She swallowed around him, still sucking, and he pulsed and flexed until he was drained. When she released him, he sank to the floor.

His eyes were closed while he tried to get some sense of control—or, hell, even some awareness—back. He heard her sultry voice, though, speak his name softly, and he opened his eyes. She had stood up, and she towered over him now, her legs spread assertively. He looked up to meet her eyes.

“You’re still hard. Can I have some of that?”

He looked stupidly down at his cock, which was sticking up out of his open jeans like a periscope. He’d forgotten that even happened, that sometimes he stayed hard. He’d *forgotten*. “You can have all you want, honey.” He started to get up.

“No—I’ll come to you.” She pulled her top off—she wasn’t wearing a bra. He watched while she undressed, toeing off her boots, unzipping and shimmying out of those leather pants, pulling her tiny thong down her legs and kicking it away. Then she stood akimbo again, looking down at him with a sexy smile.

He took in the sight of her as if he’d never seen her before. She’d be 50 in the fall, and he could see it a bit above her shoulders—she had faint lines around her eyes, and grey had started to thread through her black locks—but her body didn’t show it. She was fit but not skinny, her belly still firm, her body curved instead of sharp. Her great tits were keeping their shape. She had a lot of ink, and he’d done most of it. Most of her ink covered scars. A lot covered scars she’d gotten as a consequence of being his old lady.

“Get your eyeful?” she asked. He leaned forward and wrapped his hands around her calves, pulling her to him.

“My eyes will never be full looking at you, honey.”

She laughed and came down to her knees. Taking his face in her hands, tracing the long line of his scar with her thumb, she whispered, “There’s my silver-tongued scoundrel. I missed him.” Then she straddled him and sank down on his cock.

She was wet and hot and tight and his. All his. He’d spent 1,625 nights imagining this. Imagining her on him, around him, under him, next to him, with him. Remembering it. Every single night. He rested his forehead between her tits, gasping. She smelled so fucking good! She’d scented her letters and packages with her lavender and honey scent, and some nights he’d just huff the envelopes while he jacked off. “Oh, shit. Honey, I’m still not gonna last long. I’m sorry.”

She flexed her hips, bringing him deeper, and he almost sobbed. “Don’t worry about it, Hap. As far as I’m concerned, we don’t have to do anything but this the rest of the night, until you want to stop. Fuck the party. Everybody knows what’s happening and won’t hold it against you. You know that.”

He was shaking with his need. She was much calmer than he was, and a bad thought sneaked into the back of his head. He shoved it away, disgusted, but it came right back and took a couple of steps forward and cleared its throat. He knew this thought. He’d fought with it inside. A lot. Too much. He’d never asked, because it was a terrible fucking question.

But now he needed to. Fuck. No, he didn’t. He was home. Finally home. He was with his old lady. He was *in* his old lady. He grabbed her hips and thrust up into her, and she clenched around his cock. She felt incredible, and he needed to focus on that. He pulled her down and covered her mouth with his, kissing her savagely; she met his savagery with her own. Hooking an arm around her waist, he rolled them, laying her on the floor, covering her with his still-clothed body. His need was heavy in him, and he pounded into

her. Within in seconds, he was done, his face buried in her sweet-smelling neck, grunting with the strain of it.

“Dammit. I’m sorry.” He relaxed on top of her.

She rubbed his scalp. “I told you it’s okay, Hap. I’m just so glad to feel you. I missed you so much.”

He had to know, and he lifted his head to see her when he asked. “Vivian, did you—were you—while I was away—did you—” He couldn’t get it out.

He could see in her eyes that he didn’t need to. He could see in her eyes that he should never have started the question. “Oh, Hap. Please don’t.” She pushed on him until he pulled out of her and rolled to the floor. She stood and gathered up her clothes. No—he didn’t want her to get dressed. He stood and stopped her, his hands around her wrists.

She hadn’t answered the question.

“I was away a long time, Vivian. The prison clause protects you. I won’t be mad.” That was a lie. He couldn’t help but be mad. But he had to know.

“I can’t believe you’d ask me that, Hap. That hurts so much. It’s pretty much the only thing you could have done to ruin this night.”

“You didn’t answer me, though.” Oh, shit. He was going to kill whoever had fucked her, prison clause be damned.

“It doesn’t deserve an answer. But I’ll give it to you anyway. *No*. I haven’t been with anyone. I haven’t availed myself of the prison clause. I slept *alone* in our bed for four and a half years. I raised our daughter *alone*. I kept our life afloat *alone*. I fought tooth and nail to get you home early, even after you beat two guards unconscious. And here you are. To ask me if I fucked around. You ass.”

She yanked her hands free, and he let her, appalled at himself. “Shit, Vivian. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t go. I’m sorry. I just—I spent every day and every night in there missing you so goddamn much. Like rats eating out my insides. And sometimes, in the dark, I’d get this thought. I hated it, I knew it was wrong, but it wouldn’t go. I’m so sorry I asked, but I guess I needed to hear it.” He realized his dick was still hanging out of his open jeans, and he stuffed it away and closed up.

He felt like he had no control over his brain. He sat heavily on the end of the bed. “I’ve done time before. Not this much, but time. Never bothered me much, other than getting stir crazy. But having you and Hope out here? It fucked with me hard, all over the place. I don’t even know if I can get back from it. Everything’s different.”

Vivian sat next to him, hip to hip, still naked, and took his hand in hers. “You were in for four years, Hap. You’ve been out for four hours. It’ll come. I’m here, Hope’s here. We love you. We waited for you. And now we’re together.”

“I don’t deserve you.” He slid his arm around her shoulders.

“At this moment, I’m gonna agree with you. But you’ve got me. So, what are you gonna do with me?”

With a growl, he stood and tossed her farther onto the bed. Then he stripped naked and joined her, sliding up between her legs, hooking her knees over his shoulders. “I’m gonna eat you out and then fuck you till you scream, for starters.” He pressed his face between her legs and tasted her.

Christ. Oh, Christ, she tasted good. He’d entertained—or tortured—himself with the memory of her sweet flavor, but his memory had been faulty. He couldn’t get enough. He heard himself making weird grunting noises, like a pig at the trough, but he couldn’t stop. She was gasping and whimpering, flexing on his face. And—*oh yeah!*—she was talking. “Oh, lord, Hap. Oh, it’s good. There—there—oh, yes, Hap! Hap!” She was moving fast now. His hands clutched at her ass; he moved them to her breasts, her beautiful, full breasts, and squeezed and plumped them. She arched into his hands, crying, “Yeah—*please* Hap!” Firmly sucking her sweet, swollen clit, he tweaked her nipples, and she went off, screaming, wetting his face thoroughly.

He stayed on her until she’d crested and was on her way down. Then he pushed himself up her body and shoved hard into her, pulling her legs up in his arms. She went right back up again as he drove into her. He still wasn’t going to last long—he needed to get some damn self-control back—but this time she was right with him. He dropped his head and covered her mouth with his, his face still covered in her juices. She sucked and licked his lips. Christ, that was hot. He went fast and faster, his pace frantic, until she started bucking erratically under him. He held on, biting his lower lip until it bled, and when she screamed again, he let go with a roar.

When he roared, though she was still in the throes of her own climax, Vivian laughed, deep and earthy, a sound full of joy. He knew exactly how she felt.

## 12. Old Friend

Hap's cell rang. Hope had programmed his phone with special rings for her and Vivian, so he knew his wife was on the line. He stepped away from the Softail he was working on and pulled it out of his jeans pocket. "Hey, honey."

"Hap, are you going to be home tonight? By supper?" Her voice was off. Something was wrong.

"Far as I know. What's up, Vivian?"

She sighed, and it took her a few seconds to answer. When she did, her voice was thick. "It's Tigger. We need to talk."

Hap's heart sank. Vivian had taken the dog to the vet this morning. He was moving painfully slowly, having trouble getting up or down, and his breathing had seemed especially labored last night and this morning. When Hap had seen him for the first time after getting out of prison three months ago, he'd been shocked at how much Tigger had deteriorated. But he'd been old when Hap went inside. He was 14 now—ancient for a Shep—and Hap had an idea what she needed to tell him. "Is it time?"

"Yeah, it is. We need to decide when. And figure out what to say to Hope." She was crying; he could hear the tears in her words.

"I'll be home early, honey. Before Hope gets home from school. Okay?"

"Thank you. I love you."

"Love you."

-oOo-

Tigger was lying on his bed on the kitchen floor. When he saw Hap, his tail thumped, but he didn't even lift his head. His sides were moving erratically, strenuously. It made Hap's chest feel tight to see it. He squatted next to the dog. "Hey, buddy. Not doing so good, huh?" He scratched him behind the ears. "Gonna be okay, I promise."

Vivian was standing in the doorway. Hap could tell she'd been crying a lot; her eyes were red and bleary. He stood and took her into his arms. "How bad is it?"

"About as bad as it could be. His heart is failing. He has something called chylothorax—I think that's what it is—which means his lungs are full of thick fluid. Arthritis. Cataracts. His heart's too weak for anesthesia, so we can't fix anything. The vet said he's got to be in terrible pain all the time. I feel like such a shit. I ignored all the signs. I let this all go on too long, but I couldn't live without *both* of you. He kept me company while you were away." She laughed sadly. "I told him everything I couldn't tell you, and he'd lay his

head in my lap and listen. And Jesus, Hap. Hope! That dog has been glued to her ass since we brought her home. How's she gonna deal with this?"

Tears were streaming down her face. Hap brushed them from her cheeks with his thumbs. "We'll tell her together. She's strong, Vivian. She'll be okay. We knew he wasn't gonna live forever."

Vivian shook her head, then dropped it to his chest. "No. I don't think I did know that, not really. I don't think she does, either."

He lifted her chin. "He's in pain. We need to do it right away."

"We can bring him in first thing in the morning. But Hap, I can't do it. I'm sorry, but it's too much."

The very least thing he could do after leaving Vivian to carry the weight of their family on her shoulders for more than four years was to send the companion who'd saved his place for him off to an easy rest. "It's okay, honey. I'll take him. We need to tell Hope when she gets home, give her the evening with him." Vivian nodded and dropped her head back to his chest, weeping.

-oOo-

Hap rose early the next morning with a heavy heart. The vet scheduled this procedure before normal hours, so the grieving family would have some privacy. He had to have Tigger there by 6:30am. Vivian had said her goodbyes last night, so he didn't wake her now.

Telling Hope yesterday had been hard. She hadn't cried—Hap was wondering whether she ever cried anymore and hating that he didn't know—but she'd been obviously sad. She'd spent the whole evening on the kitchen floor with Tigger's head in her lap. She did her homework there, and, when that was done, she'd read until he'd made her go to bed.

Trying not to make any noise and wake his girls up, he went to the kitchen. Hope was there, sitting on the floor, Tigger's head in her lap. The dog's breathing was even more labored this morning. She looked up as he came into the room. "Daddy, I want to come with you."

He shook his head. "No, midge. It's too hard. You need to go to school."

"I can't go to school! Please don't make me! And I want to be with him. Daddy, please. He needs me!"

Hap squatted next to his daughter and her dog. Tigger had been her best babysitter for her whole life. He'd been better than the baby monitor, alerting them when she woke, when she needed changing, when she needed anything. He'd kept her out of who knew how

many scrapes. But he'd followed her happily into mischief, once he'd deemed it safe enough. When she went from crib to regular bed, as if he'd understood that she had more freedom, he'd stopped sleeping in their room and had moved to hers, spending every night for the next ten years sleeping just inside her door. Guarding her.

He was her third parent. For four and a half years, he'd been her second.

"You sure? It's gonna be real hard."

She nodded. "I know. I have to do it. For him."

His girl was strong. He could see the resolve in her eyes. "Okay. Let me call in to school and leave a note for your mom."

-oOo-

Tigger had been unable to get up and walk at all, though he'd really tried. Hap carried him to Vivian's cage, and Hope had sat in the back seat with him. Now, Hap carried him into the vet's office.

A woman in purple scrubs was waiting at the door for them, and she led them to a small room. She was quiet and respectful, and, telling them that the vet would be in soon, she left them alone.

He went to one knee and laid Tigger on the floor. As Hap stroked his thick fur, Tigger lifted his head and licked his denim-covered knee. Damn, this was hard. Hope sat down on the floor, and Tigger tried to scoot to her. Hap moved out of her way so that she could get closer to the dog. She lifted his big head and laid it in her lap. Then, they waited.

They didn't have to wait long. Dr. Merrick came in, holding two hypodermics. "Mr. Lowman?" He held out his hand.

Hap shook it, not getting up from the floor. His knees were killing him, but he wasn't going anywhere. As long as his daughter was on the floor, so was he.

Merrick said, "I know this is very hard, but it's the right thing." Hap didn't need him to tell him that, so he didn't respond. The vet went on. "First, I'll give Tigger a shot to make him sleepy and take away his pain. Then, after about ten minutes or so—it depends on how quickly his body can distribute the medicine, so for Tigger, it might be a little longer—when he's asleep and comfortable, I'll give him another shot. That one should take only a few minutes. And then he'll be at peace. You may stay with him as long as you like, though."

Hap nodded. The doctor cleared his throat. "I need to ask what you would like to do with his remains. We can take care of him, unless you would like to have him cremated or interred."

Hap had no idea. He and Vivian hadn't talked about this at all. The thought of having to deal with this beyond today made his stomach clench, but it wasn't his call. It should be Hope's if anyone's. He looked at his daughter, who hadn't taken her eyes off her dog. She was too young for the question, but fuck, she was too young for most of the shit she'd had to deal with already in her life. "Midget?"

She turned stricken eyes to him and shook her head. Okay. He'd make the call. Holding his daughter's eyes, he said to the vet, "We want you to take care of him." He raised his eyebrows at Hope, asking; she nodded and turned her attention back to Tigger.

"Okay. Fair enough." Merrick squatted down on the other side of Tigger. "Hey, boy." The dog's tail thumped weakly. He'd never feared the vet's office. They gave him cookies, and all the women in the office fawned over him. Hap had always joked that the dog was a sucker for a piece of ass in scrubs.

The vet stroked Tigger gently for several seconds before picking up his leg. He shaved a small patch with a plastic razor he'd pulled from his pocket, and then he injected the first hypodermic into a vein. Tigger licked the hand holding the needle. Merrick stood. "Okay. I'll be in to check in about ten minutes. Hopefully, he'll be sleeping by then." He left them alone.

It took fifteen minutes, but Tigger fell asleep, his sides heaving weakly, little puffs blowing out his jowls at erratic intervals. Hope had curled over, her head on Tigger's. She was kissing his nose over and over as she stroked his side. His chest in knots over his daughter's distress more than anything else, Hap simply rested one hand on the dog's haunch and his other on Hope's back.

The vet came in to check again at fifteen minutes, saw that Tigger was under, and injected the killing shot. That was how Hap thought of it; that's what it was. Before he left again, Merrick said, softly, "It won't be long now."

And it wasn't. A few minutes, and then Tigger took two big breaths in quick succession. Then he didn't breathe again. Hope started to rock, cradling Tigger's head in her arms. Hap tried to pull her to him, but she wouldn't come. She held on to her dog. So he got up on his aching knees and wrapped them both in his arms.

The vet came in and checked with his stethoscope. Then he patted Tigger's still body and nodded at Hap. "Take your time."

When he left, Hope sat motionless, Tigger's head on her knee. She wasn't crying. She was miserable. She was devastated. But her eyes were dry. He hooked a finger under her chin and turned her head. "It's okay to cry, midget."

She stared at him, her dark eyes deep and sad. "You're not crying, Daddy."

“No.” He didn’t cry. He wouldn’t. He’d cried twice since he was small, both times over the death of their first daughter, Katherine. He would never cry for anything less.

She lifted her chin away from his hand. “I don’t cry, either.” She kissed Tigger’s nose one more time and stood up, laying his head gently down on the floor. “I want to go home.”

-oOo-

Vivian had packed up Tigger’s things while they were at the vet and put the box in the garage. When they got home, Hap called Kevin, a Prospect, and had him take it away. Hap had kept Tigger’s collar and tags. He put them in his desk drawer.

Vivian had embraced Hope when she came in, and they spent most of the day on the living room couch, Vivian’s arm around their daughter, both of them reading.

Hap, restless and out of sorts, headed to work. He knew he should stay home and be a comfort to his girls, but he felt like he didn’t belong. Hope and Vivian had formed a small, tight circle while he was away. He wasn’t sure there was room in it for him.

He’d spent some time drinking at the clubhouse after the garage closed, so it was fairly late when he got home. He was a little drunk, but not too bad. He’d gotten home in one piece, anyway. His tolerance for alcohol wasn’t what it had been before he’d gone inside. It took him all three allowed tries to remember the alarm code.

Even though he was sure he’d woken everybody up trying to get into the house, he tried to be quiet going down the hall. He heard something coming from Hope’s room, and he almost knocked and went in. He paused, though, one hand on her doorknob, the other in a loose fist, raised to knock, and listened. He noticed that there was no light coming under her door.

She was crying. Alone in her room, after midnight, in the dark.

Hap dropped his raised hand and let go of her doorknob. He leant his forehead on the door. He wanted to comfort her, but he didn’t know how. He didn’t know what he should do. There was nothing. He could only intrude.

Leaning on her door, he listened to her weep, feeling powerless and lonely. Finally, he pushed off, turned around, and went into his own dark bedroom. Vivian was sleeping with her back to his side of the bed. That made him feel lonelier. He stripped to his boxers and slid into the cold space across from her.

But she turned to him immediately and tucked herself under his arm, her head on his chest, her hand on his belly. Nearly sick with relief, he kissed her head reverently. She turned her face to his. “You’re starting to stay at the clubhouse drinking until late an awful lot, Hap. I’m worried. And I miss you.”

“You want me home?”

She propped herself up on her elbow. Even in the dim room, he could see she was staring, maybe getting angry. “Of course I want you home. What’s going on?”

He pulled her back down to his chest. “Nothing, honey. Just having trouble adjusting, I guess. I’ll come home earlier.”

“I always want you with me, Hap. I love you.”

He held her tightly. “Fuck, honey, I love you. I’ll try to be better.”

### 13. Good Samaritan

Hap thought that there was a good chance he was spending more time at the principal's office as Hope's father than he had when he was in school himself. He and Vivian had allowed themselves some optimism, thinking that maybe things would go easier for Hope when she got to high school. Bigger school, more students, different teachers—they thought there might have been a chance that the wider world of high school had room for her. But it was the same as ever. Worse, maybe, because Hope was caught in the throes of puberty now, too. Actually, they were all caught in the throes of her puberty.

She'd gotten all the way to high school without ever being invited to a schoolmate's house—not for a sleepover, not for a birthday party, or a pool party, nothing. She'd never had a schoolmate over. She had one friend in school: Darcy. But, even though Darcy had no other friends, either, and even though Hope had been standing between her and school bullies since 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Darcy's parents didn't want their daughter to have anything to do with Hope, so they were only friends at school.

Hope had never learned to take any of that in stride. Neither had Hap. He knew it was his fault. Who he was, what he did—even the genes she had inherited from him. After a rough year, he'd finally more or less adjusted to life back at home and found his footing with his family, but he knew he'd never again shake the certainty that his daughter's difficulties were his fault.

That didn't mean he wasn't furious at the parents who guarded their children from his daughter as if being a biker's kid were a contagious disease. If it weren't for Vivian holding him back, sometimes literally, he was sure he'd have been back inside after violating his parole on all those shitty parents' heads.

This year, Hope was struggling even more because she'd lost Thomas, too. He'd graduated high school last year and was now away at college. Abel was around, still prospecting, but Thomas was Hope's only real friend, and now she was alone. Hormones, loneliness, and her naturally hot-tempered disposition had cooked up into quiet the adolescent stew.

Abel was still an arrogant prick, but he'd been nice to Hope since Thomas left—Hap was paying attention, and he thought Abel was starting to be *too* nice to his 14-year-old daughter. Her body was changing, beginning to develop. It looked like she was going to continue to take after her mother physically—and her mother was sex on a stick. Hap wouldn't be surprised if he ended up killing some overheated boy, maybe more than one, maybe even the President's eldest, before he got Hope safely grown.

Luckily, Hope wasn't paying or any boy much attention, especially not Abel. She was no dummy, and Abel had been an asshole to her and Thomas for years. She might be lonely, but she wasn't so desperate for company that she'd put up with him. She called him out on his swagger. Hap liked seeing her put him in his place, even though he was six years older. His girl had a mouth on her, and a brain behind it.

That mouth got her into trouble, though, as did her fists and feet. Which is why he was walking into the school, heading to the office to pick up his daughter, who'd been suspended for fighting.

Again.

He never did understand the logic of giving a kid who hates school a vacation from school as a punishment, but that's what they did. As Hap turned the corner to the hall that would take him to the office, he passed two cops on their way out. He met the bigger cop's eyes, and they stared until they were out of each other's sightline.

He knew. Fuck. The goddamn school had called the cops—she'd really hurt somebody. They weren't taking her away, though, which meant it was a “scared straight” exercise. He remembered his first chat with the cops. Didn't take.

He got prepared to do some damage control. If she'd hurt a kid, that kid's parents could still press charges. It looked like he'd have an errand to run this afternoon. They wouldn't press charges. No, they wouldn't.

He went into the office. Hope was sitting in the reception area, staring at the floor at her feet. She had a bruise and a couple of scratches on her cheek, her jeans were dirty, and she was wearing a school t-shirt she hadn't been wearing when she'd left the house this morning. What he noticed more than any of that, though, were her hands. Her knuckles were like ground meat. He was calling Tara as soon as they got out of here.

She looked up as he approached but didn't say anything.

“Hey, midget.” He sat in the seat next to her and picked up one of her hands. She flinched a little but didn't pull away. “What happened this time?”

Shrugging, looking back down at the floor, she said, “Got in a fight.”

“Yeah, I got that much. You know I want details before I go in there, so come on.”

“Some boys cornered Darcy in the lunchroom.” Sullen and uncommunicative. Hap didn't love adolescence so far.

“All of it, midge. Not gonna say it again.”

She huffed her irritation. “They took her food off her tray and smeared it all over her—on her butt and boobs and in her hair. Then they were yanking on her, taking stuff off other people's trays and shoving it in her clothes. I came in, and they were doing that, and people were just standing around and laughing. So I helped her.”

Christ. Hap didn't know Darcy at all, since she and Hope had never spent any time together away from school. But he'd seen her. She was a big girl. A very big girl. And obviously shy. The kind of girl who walked through school hallways with her head down. Hap didn't know what kind of friendship a girl like that could offer his spitfire of a daughter, but Hope had taken her under her wing. Two outcasts, nothing in common but that.

"Helped her how, Hope?"

At the sound of her name, she finally looked directly at him. "I made them stop."

He'd opened his mouth to push her further when the principal, Mr. Owens, opened his office door and stepped out. "Hello, Mr. Lowman. Please come in. Hope, I'd like you to wait where you are, please." He looked at Hap, showing some slight hesitation. "If that's all right with you?" Hap nodded. He wanted to talk about this without Hope first.

When Owens closed his office door, he asked, "Will you have a seat?"

Hap shook his head. "I'll stand." Owens nodded and also remained standing. This wasn't their first spar.

"I expect that Hope told you what happened."

"She said she helped her friend."

"Yes, she did. What those boys did was awful, and they will be disciplined. But Mr. Lowman, Hope fought four boys today. She stomped one boy in the head and broke his jaw. And she was strangling another when the lunchroom monitor finally pulled her off."

Hap's first and strongest response was pride. His girl was tough as steel. But he was pissed, too—not at Hope. "Where was the *lunchroom monitor* when the boys started all this shit?"

"In the bathroom. He shouldn't have been, and that will be addressed as well. The more pressing point at this moment, though, is that Hope is—" he stopped and cleared his throat nervously, and Hap made sure his expression didn't make Owens feel any less anxious. The principal's voice was more hesitant when he continued. "She's dangerous. She has poor impulse control and a violent temper. I'm quite convinced that she would have killed that child if she'd hadn't been pulled off."

Hap was struggling with his own impulse control now. His daughter was not dangerous. She was temperamental, but Vivian had worked with her for years—so had Hap, over the past year—and she had learned to pick her battles better. If she really lost her shit, she had good reason. "Why were the cops here? Are there charges coming?"

Owens sighed, and Hap's fists clenched hard. "I called the deputies in to talk to her. I'm hoping they got through to her. Hope is an extremely gifted young woman"—Hap felt a shock at his daughter being referred to as a woman—"but she is also one of the most challenging students in school. Her school file is a compendium of discipline problems. She is bright enough to go to and succeed at any college she chooses—probably to get a full academic scholarship, even to an ivy—but no good college will have a student who is so volatile. If she's to have a chance like that, she needs to learn how to get along with people and control herself, and she needs to do it soon."

What he wanted more than anything was to drive this asshole in his tie and short-sleeved shirt straight into the floor, head first, but Hap breathed through his rage. When he felt like he could speak evenly, he ignored everything Owens had just said and asked, "What's the fallout from today?"

Now Owens sat at his desk. "For Hope, a ten-day suspension, and then two weeks of in-school suspension, where she'll spend the day in a different classroom. Mr. Lowman, that's the most severe disciplinary action besides expulsion. Another incident like this, and I will begin expulsion proceedings. As for the rest of it, I've spoken to the parents of the two boys she badly injured, and I advised them not to seek charges. I don't know whether they'll take my advice or not."

Hap nodded. He could handle the parents. He had another question. "Why is my daughter wearing a different shirt than the one she was wearing this morning?"

At that, Owens looked deeply discomfited. "Yes. Er, it seems that in the scuffle, her shirt was torn off. We got her another one as quickly as possible."

In an instant, Hap was shaking with rage. He walked to Owens' desk and planted his hands on it, looming over the bureaucratic motherfucker. "I want to make sure I'm clear. Four boys were tormenting a sad girl while the rest of the little shitheads laughed at her. The adult who was supposed to be in charge was off taking a dump. My daughter stepped in and took up for Darcy, fought off her four attackers, who *tore off her shirt*, and *she's* the one who's dangerous?"

He leaned in close, got right in Owens' face. "She's not dangerous, asshole. But I am. Next time you need a reminder, you won't be behind your desk when you get it." He turned on his heel and stalked out to collect his girl.

-oOo-

He called Tara as they were walking to his bike, and she told him she'd meet them at the clubhouse right away. Tara was Head of Surgery at St. Thomas now, and spent more time in meetings than she did in the operating room.

Tara got there shortly after they did, and she gave Hope a thorough check. “Nothing’s broken. Your knuckles are going to hurt for a few days—and if you’re not careful, sweetheart, they’re going to end up scarred and nasty-looking, like your dad’s.

To which Hap interjected, “Hey!” Tara just smirked as she cleaned up Hope’s scratches and wrapped her knuckles.

Then she kissed Hope’s unhurt cheek and said, “You sure are a Son’s daughter, no question.” Hope smiled proudly at that, but it was bittersweet for Hap. Hope had never blamed him for her troubles at school, and she’d never resented the club. In fact, she cleaved to it. From the time she was small, the clubhouse was one of her favorite places to be. But Hap thought it was because she had no other place to go. The club was the only place besides her home where she was accepted for who she was. And, with Chibs keeping his family at a distance, she’d been the only daughter for years, until a few weeks ago, when Frank and Juice’s Nora had come into the world, so her uncles treated her like the treasure she was.

He wanted her to have more choices, though. She couldn’t be a Son. He didn’t want her to be an old lady—at least not by default. If she ended up staying in this life, he wanted it to be because she’d made a real choice from a wide array of options. She should be able to do anything.

By the time Tara was done, everybody on the premises had heard the story of how Hope had gotten an unexpected break from school. She was beset by uncles hugging and kissing on her, telling her how proud they were of her. Hap was proud, too. His daughter was strong. She could take care of herself. More than that, though, she stood up for the weak. That was not his influence—that was her mother. Vivian had compassion. Hap had never had anything but contempt for weakness. If he’d been in Hope’s place, at that age, he wouldn’t have helped. He wouldn’t have participated, but he wouldn’t have helped. He would have walked away, disgusted by the whole scene.

When Abel started to make his way over, Hap grabbed his arm. Abel glared at him defiantly. Saying nothing, but looking the kid dead in the eye, Hap shook his head. Then Abel pulled his arm loose and strode back out to the garage. That boy needed some education. And he needed to keep himself clear of Hap’s girl.

-oOo-

Later, after Hope had gone to her room for the night, Hap went out to the music room, where Vivian was working. She was on a deadline and had spent a lot of time out there recently. Vivian had taken the news of Hope’s suspension with equanimity. Even before Hap had gone inside, they’d had enough experiences with their daughter fighting, and with resulting school disciplinary action, that they’d learned not to react overmuch. As often as not, their response was sympathy for Hope. They both felt that their daughter got singled out because she was a known “problem.” But neither he nor Hope had yet given

Vivian the complete story about what had happened this time, and Hap was still fuming. At his first opportunity, he went to talk to his wife.

She was working out a melody on the guitar he'd bought her years ago; she stopped and smiled at him as he came in. "Hey—Hope in for the night?"

"Yeah. We need to talk more about what happened today. This was a bad one." He sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

Vivian set her Martin on its stand and came over. "Hell. What did she do?"

"It's not that. She did good. Real good." He explained in detail what had happened. Vivian hadn't known about the shirt, because Hope had changed as soon as she'd gotten home. Hap watched emotions roll over her face—anger, worry, pride, concern, rage.

When he was done, Vivian sat there, pale. Eventually, she asked, "Is she going to get arrested?"

He'd spent the afternoon ensuring that she would not. "No. I handled that. She'll be okay. It was Tommy Benedict's jaw she broke, by the way."

Being a good old lady, she took that on its face and didn't ask. "Good. I hate that kid. I really do. Lord, Hap. I don't even know what to say. I'm so mad at so many people. Poor Hope."

Hap nodded. "She's okay now. But, honey, we got to get her out of that school."

"We can't, Hap. There's no other place to send her. You know that, and I hate that you keep raising the question and making me say no. I wish there was an option, but there isn't. We need to help her deal. All we can do."

"What if they expel her?"

Vivian shrugged. "I don't know. I guess we cross that bridge then."

Dropping his head to the back of the couch, Hap sighed heavily. He knew Vivian was right. But he hated just standing by and watching their daughter chafe inside a world in which she didn't fit, and that didn't want her. He needed a way to fix it, at least some part of it, for her.

He sighed and sat up. "Okay, but I'm going to teach her how to throw a punch so she doesn't break her hand or tear the shit out of her knuckles."

Her response was practical, and Hap was a little surprised. He shouldn't have been, though; the assumption for both of them had been for a long time that Hope would

continue to fight in school. “What d’you have in mind? I don’t want her rolling around in the ring with one of the Prospects or hangarounds.”

He agreed entirely; in fact, the mere thought of it made his blood heat up. “I’ll put her on the heavy bag in the garage.”

-oOo-

He gave her hands a few days to heal up, then he got her a small pair of gloves, and they started working out together in the garage. She loved it; she’d been fascinated by the bag since he’d put it up right after he’d gotten back home. He taught her how to make and hold her fist so that she wouldn’t hurt her wrist or her hand, and to take body shots, going for the gut rather than the face. She listened and learned.

Hap noticed that instead of the quiet, surly teen they’d been getting used to living with, Hope was relaxed and even playful after she’d pounded on the bag for a hour or so. He didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of this before—her scrappiness was long established. Giving her an outlet for it should have been a no-brainer. But she was his beautiful daughter, and it just hadn’t occurred to him—or to her mother—that she could punch out some of her frustration and discontent in their garage.

After one session right before her suspension was over, they sat in the garage, in a couple of lawn chairs. Hap had a beer, Hope had a bottle of juice. Even though he hated her prick principal intensely, he’d been thinking often about what he’d said about Hope going to college. She was in ninth grade; she didn’t have that long to go. Hap didn’t even know what she thought about her future.

“You ever think about college, midget?”

She shook her head vigorously. “No way, Daddy. I just want school to be over.”

Hap didn’t have a big hard-on about college. He wanted her to do what she wanted, whatever it was. “What do you want to do, then? When you finish school.”

She shrugged. “Don’t really care. Just get a job someplace. Whatever.”

Maybe he didn’t care about college, but it hurt his heart that she didn’t even bother to dream or plan at all. Seemed like that was what kids were supposed to do. Dream big. Thomas had done it—and now he was at UCLA, wanting to be a lawyer. But Thomas was mellow and sweet-natured. He’d had a relatively normal school life, even though he was the kid of a Son.

“You can do anything you want, midget. Go anywhere. Principal says you could even get scholarships to good schools, if you could calm down some. You never think about that? Trying to stay out of trouble?”

His daughter turned and faced him fully. “I don’t start fights, Daddy. I promise. I just want everybody to leave me alone. But if somebody starts something, I finish it. That’s what you always said I should do. Mr. Owens says I should walk away from jerks like Tommy and those guys. Is that what you think?”

Hap thought of his daughter standing up for her friend, whose parents thought Hope wasn’t good enough. He thought about Tommy Benedict and all the shit he’d gotten away with—and what he’d done to Hope in that latest fight. He was proud of his girl. She was strong. She was good. She’d make her way. She didn’t need to become somebody different. Taking her hand in his, he said, “No. You stand up, and that’s good. You take care of people like Darcy. You’re a good girl. You make me proud. Just pick your fights, make ‘em count. And you tell me if you need me.”

“I will, Daddy.”

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. “I know it’s hard to be my kid. I’m real sorry, midge.”

Hope pulled her hand free from his, and his heart fell a little. But then she got out of her chair and sat in his lap. She hadn’t done that since before he’d gone inside. She lay her head on his shoulder. “It’s not hard, Daddy. I mean, except when you were away. You’re a good dad.”

Rendered speechless and knowing that he’d probably never have another moment like this with his growing daughter, Hap simply wrapped his arms around her and held on.

## 14. Vice President

Hap watched dawn happen on the bedroom ceiling. He hadn't closed his eyes all night. Today was going to be a hard day.

Vivian stirred. She was curled against him, her back tucked along his side. She'd fallen asleep naked last night, after sex. He unfolded his arms from behind his head and shifted so that she was against his chest and he could hold her close, burying his face in her long, wild hair. She caught his hand and pulled him even closer.

"You awake, honey?" He whispered it and nosed through her hair to kiss her neck. She made a little purring sound and started to turn toward him. He stopped her; he wanted to stay like this for a minute. They'd been together 17 years, and he was no less entranced with her than he had been the first night he'd bought her a drink. A lot of living had happened in those 17 years—some of it hard. Good times or bad, his love for her had only deepened.

Sometimes he thought about the man he'd been before Vivian and could barely recognize him. He knew he was still there, was still that man deep down, but Vivian had given him balance and depth. She'd given him love and shown him a way to love. She made him a good man. A good husband. A good father. Or one who cared enough to try, anyway.

He wasn't one who often indulged in maudlin reflection, though, and he chuckled sadly. Today was a day for such thoughts, he guessed.

Vivian turned her head at the sound of his slight laugh. "What's up?"

"Nothing, honey. Just thinking how much I love you, how glad I am for you."

Now when she tried to turn to him, he let her, and she snuggled against his chest, her head under his chin. "I love you, Hap." She slid her hand over the bare skin of his waist and down his hip. His cock, which had been half-hard since he rolled and pulled her to him, swelled full, and he growled low in his chest. He fed his hand into her hair and pulled her head back. She looked up at him with bright, dark, hungry eyes.

He kissed her hard, pushing his tongue into her mouth right away. It was a dance she knew well, and she opened her mouth and met her tongue to his. She started to roll on top of him, but he grunted and pushed her to her back, breaking from her mouth to kiss down her neck, over her shoulders, to her breasts. He settled there to suckle her, and she arched up, pressing her breast up into his mouth with a moan. He felt her hands on his head, scratching lightly the way he liked, and sucked harder.

She tried to catch his shoulders and pull him back up, but he felt consumed by a need to worship her and instead kissed and licked his way over her ribs and down her belly. He knew when she knew where he was headed, because she whispered "Oh"—a breathy, sexy sound that made his cock twitch—and flexed her hips up.

He pushed his hands under her thighs and gathered her legs close, his hands hooking around to rest on her belly as he leaned in to taste her. She was wet and ready; she was always wet and ready. Those long-ago days when sex had been hard and scary for her—for them—were dusty memories now. When he touched his tongue to her clit, she responded with her whole body, flexing and writhing around him. “Fuck, Vivian,” he murmured into her core.

He tasted her with tongue and lips and teeth until she was squirming madly, moaning quietly but constantly, her fingers grabbing at him. “Oh, Hap. Lord, please. Please please please please.” When he felt the gentle tremor run through her that meant she was close, he pulled away.

Just as confusion and frustration began to dawn on her face, he pushed up to loom over her. She smiled then and lifted her legs to hook around his hips as he sank deep into her with a groan. She clutched at him, looping her arms around his neck and pulling up off the bed as he thrust into her. “Fuck, yeah, Hap. I love the feel of you inside me. Oh god, you’re so fucking *hard*.” He laughed his pleasure at her sexy talk and tucked his head against her shoulder, sucking on her neck—but only lightly. Today wouldn’t be a good day for a love bite. She came, her body tensing, her hips driving against his, whispering “yeah, yeah, yeah,” until she went rigid, her muscles clamping hard on his cock.

He almost came then, too, but he held off and rolled them over, putting her on top. “Come on, honey. Ride me.” Still coming off her climax, she grinned down at him dazedly. And then she rode him hard. He took her beautiful tits in his hands and worked them the way he knew she liked best, pulling, tweaking, and twisting. He loved the feel of her nipples tightening and swelling between his fingers. He could feel her climbing back up to another orgasm as she ground down on him. God, she felt so good. Still so firm and tight, her body all the sexier for his utter familiarity with it. She was his. Only his. No one knew her the way he knew her. No one knew him the way she knew him. No one ever would.

She was speeding up, grunting, her teeth biting down on her lower lip. When he felt her start to go over, he flipped them again and pounded into her. She came again, yelling “Fuck!” and he let himself go, too, tossing his head back and roaring into the ceiling.

They hadn’t bothered being quiet since he’d gotten out of prison. Hope was fully aware that her parents liked fucking each other. She even teased them about it. And vice-versa.

When he flopped back to the mattress and tucked Vivian’s warm, damp body against his, he sent a thought out to Bobby, wherever he was. He thought the old son of a bitch would appreciate a good fuck happening on the day of his funeral.

-oOo-

Sons from all over the country and the world had converged on Charming to pay their respects to the SAMCRO Vice President. Bobby had been a Son for almost 50 years, he was known, respected, and universally loved. The funeral procession had been a sight to behold—a wide, roaring swath of black rolling over the street.

Afterward, the clubhouse was bursting at the seams. Bobby didn't have an old lady. His kids were long grown, and he had been on complicated terms with them. They were in attendance, but the real mourners, the ones who felt the loss most acutely, were his brothers. Chibs had even brought his old lady and their girl.

Hap leaned against the bar with a glass of Jack and watched his girls. Hope was almost 15, and expected to put in some work. She'd been babysitting Leo and Nora while the old ladies managed the clubhouse—got the 'Eaters setting out and serving food and drink, arranged accommodations, generally hosted things. Hap had never paid attention to what the women did at events, but he did today. They were a finely honed machine.

Thomas had come home for the funeral and was sitting with Hope, helping her babysit. She had brightened and relaxed considerably when she'd seen him. Several times, Hap had seen her laugh openly, then remember herself and look around, guilty that she was happy on this day. He wanted to tell her that her Uncle Bobby would love seeing her happy. Now Thomas and Hope were sitting on the floor building some kind of contraption with Leo, while little Nora slept in a bassinet next to them. Not for the first time, he thought about what a good couple they'd make. He'd like to see his girl with someone like Thomas. Someone who'd take care of her, give her a choice for a different kind of life, if she wanted it.

“Got yourself a fine family there, brother.” Hap hadn't noticed Quinn sidling up to him.

“Yeah.” Hap raised his glass to his old Nomad President and took a swallow.

Quinn nodded and drank from his own glass. “You been settled a long time now. Ever miss the road?”

Did he? He used to. He used to get restless if he'd gone longer than a couple of weeks without at least an overnigher. And when he'd gotten out, for the first several months, when things were so hard, he'd just ride for hours, as if he were trying to fill up a bucket that had gone dry inside. But he'd never loved riding Nomad. He'd always liked having a home base. And he'd had an actual home for a long time. He shook his head. “No, brother, I don't.”

“I get that. Glad for ya. I ain't like that. I don't know from home. Especially a day like this, makes me hungry to ride.”

Hap chuckled. “You just rode a day and a half to get here, man. You're still hungry?”

Quinn tossed his head back and laughed openly. “What can I say?” He got serious then. “I don’t know. Somethin’ about the way Bobby went’s got me on edge.”

Hap understood. He’d talked to Vivian about it, and she’d given him some good insight. “It’s because we all expect we’re gonna go out in some blaze of glory—bloody, violent, boots on our feet, kutte on our back, gun in our hands. We want to go out warriors. Bobby had a heart attack, died in a fucking hospital with a tube up his dick.” Vivian had said it differently, but the point was the same.

Quinn shivered a little. “How old was he?”

Hap didn’t know, exactly. “Mid 70s? Around there.”

“Nothin’ sadder than an outlaw gettin’ old.” They looked at each other—themselves both past 60—and laughed. Quinn clapped Hap on the back. “We ain’t drinkin’ near enough for this shit, my brother.” He refilled their glasses.

-oOo-

A couple of drinks later, Hap was on the hunt for his wife when Jax called him over. He led him into the Chapel, the only empty room in the building. “Have a seat, brother.” He sat at the head of the table, as usual.

Hap sat in his customary seat on the door side of the table. Jax shook his head. “No, Hap.” He gestured to his left. Bobby’s seat. The Vice President’s seat.

Hap was confounded. “Jax?”

His President smiled. “I want you to take the VP patch, Hap.”

“Brother, no. I’m not an officer. I’m a soldier. A grunt. Your dirty work guy. You want Chibs. You want somebody with a level head to advise you.”

“You’re right. But that’s you. You have the edge I want—I need. But you’ve changed a lot, Hap. You’ve always seen everything. But now you reflect and consider, but you don’t get bogged down in it. You know when and how to act. And Jesus, you’re all club. Your loyalty has been tested and tested, but you don’t waver. That’s what I need. Someone I can trust to see what maybe I don’t. Someone who will know when the hard shit needs to be done. You’re who I need at my left. Chibs is good at my right. That’s where I need him.”

Hap stared at Jax, thinking. He’d never considered being an officer. He didn’t want to be an officer. He didn’t feel up to that responsibility. But he had never refused the club anything. He could count on one hand with fingers left over the number of times he’d even *asked* the club for anything.

His President said he needed him. “Okay.” He stood, and Jax did as well, walking over and embracing him.

“Thank you, brother.” With a hard clap to his back, Jax released him. He handed Hap the bright white Vice President’s patch.

-oOo-

Thomas came home with them that night, and he and Hope settled themselves in the living room in front of the television, playing some kind of extremely loud video game. They sat on the floor together, soda and popcorn at the ready, blowing the shit out of aliens of some kind. Vivian brought out pillows and bedding and set them in a pile on the couch; Thomas would spend the night tonight.

Hap stood in the kitchen with a beer, leaning against the wall, watching them. Vivian walked up to him and put her hands around his waist. He hooked his free hand over her shoulder.

She looked up at him. “Hey, VP. What’re you thinking?”

Hope and Thomas were laughing and talking smack. Her smile was wide and her eyes bright. Hap nodded toward her. “Good to see that. She doesn’t look like that very often.”

Vivian sighed and laid her head on Hap’s chest. “No. She’s a serious kid.”

“She’s an unhappy kid.”

“Hey”—Vivian looked up at him and grabbed his face in her hands. “That’s not true, Hap. She has trouble at school, yes. She’s alone too much, probably. But she’s happy. She loves us and knows we love her. She’s surrounded by people who adore her. She has things she likes to do. She’s serious. She’s mature—she’s seen things and lived things that most girls her age haven’t. But would you really rather she be some vapid, giggly princess?”

No. No, he wouldn’t. He loved his girl the way she was. He just wished she’d smile and laugh like that more often. “You’re right, honey. I just want to do right by her.”

“We are, Hap. She has a loving family. That’s the best thing anybody can do for their kid.”

She certainly had that. Hap leaned down and kissed his old lady, and she melted into his arms. Mmmm. “Wanna go to bed?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“You want to go to bed right now and leave Hope and Thomas alone in the living room together? Aren’t you worried? He’s 18.”

Hap laughed. “You think he’ll make a play for *my* daughter? While I’m under the same roof? Honey—you wound me.” He pulled away from her and took her hand. “Here, if it’ll make you feel better.” He walked to the living room and stood in that doorway. He cleared his throat, and Hope paused the game. They both looked up at Hap. Hap made eye contact with Thomas. “We’re going to bed. Keep it down in here.” He let his stare linger a minute.

Thomas swallowed. “Goodnight, Uncle Hap. Goodnight, Aunt Viv.”

Vivian was laughing. “Goodnight kids. Blueberry pancakes in the morning.”

They turned and headed to the hallway. Hope called after them, “You keep it down, too!”

## 15. History Lesson

“Whatever!”

Hope’s door slammed.

“Fine! Stay in there and pout! Won’t change my mind! And don’t expect me to keep supper for you!”

The patio door slammed.

Such was life with a 15-year-old daughter and a possibly—though, sweet Christ, he hadn’t brought it up—menopausal wife. But something was up. Vivian had lost her serenity. Hope had never had any.

Hap sat at his desk, in his den, behind his closed, locked door. The thought occurred to him to stay put, kick back in the recliner, turn on the History Channel, and stay out of the damn fray. But he knew Vivian would be pissed if he didn’t go out and get a debrief. With a sigh, he locked up the papers he’d been going through, put his reading glasses on the blotter, and left his sanctuary, locking the door behind him. He went into the kitchen and pulled a couple of bottles of beer from the fridge. After he opened them, he went out through the patio door and headed to the music room, where he knew he’d find his old lady.

She was sitting at the piano, plinking absently on the keys. He came up. “Scoot.” She slid over on the bench and made room for him; he sat next to her and handed her a beer. “So tell me.”

She took a long pull from the bottle. Hap watched her throat move and pushed back an impulse to kiss it. The gesture would not be well received right now. So he took a swallow of his own beer instead.

“It’s the damn tattoo again. She will not let that thing drop. I got the whole thing about how we’re terrible hypocrites. Now she says she’s just going to do it and then we’ll have to—and these are her own lovely words—‘suck it.’ Hap, she looks older than she is. She could very well do it.”

“Not gonna happen, Vivian. She’s a smart girl—knows better. She’s just popping off.” Hope *was* a smart girl. She knew her father would lose his shit if she let someone else ink her. They had two strict rules about ink in their house: nothing until she was 18, and then her father would do it. Obviously, at some point there might be ink he would decline to do—certain places on his daughter’s body he had no intention of ever seeing again and didn’t like thinking of anyone else seeing either—but her first ink would not be in one of those places. The 18 rule had little to do with the law; Hap couldn’t care less about that—though there wasn’t any point in the attention they’d draw if their underage daughter was seen bearing ink. It had to do with not letting a kid make that kind of basically permanent

decision about body art. Hap's first three tats were buried under other ink. He'd gotten his first at about Hope's age—Popeye with a can of spinach, on the back of his shoulder. Stupid choice, shitty work. He shuddered to remember it.

He knew the ink Hope wanted. She had designed it herself and had shown it to him. He'd told her the truth, that it was pretty, and well drawn. He'd also thought it was surprisingly girly—which he had kept to himself. And it was big. About twelve by four inches, all curlicues, little bell flowers, and a butterfly. But at least it wasn't a Smurf or something.

Vivian sighed and leaned on Hap's shoulder. "I know. It's just every fucking day there's some kind of drama with her. She's either in trouble at school, or she's screaming at me because I won't let her dress like a sweetbutt and get her nipples pierced like Frank—"

Hap cut her off. "What the fuck? How does she know about Frank's nipples? Why are we talking about Frank and Hope's nipples?" He was suddenly feeling deeply traumatized. He needed whiskey. The beer in his hand was not going to cut it. But he drained it anyway.

Vivian laughed at his reaction, and some of her tension eased. "See? You miss out on all the best fights. Everybody knows about Frank's piercings since they put the pool in at their house, Hap. Bathing suits are clingy. You'd know if you deigned to put a suit on yourself and hang out by the pool."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. Frank and Juice had put a pool in just a few weeks ago, and it was a big draw. He, however, had no need to see Sons in swim trunks. And he certainly had no need to see his daughter in a bathing suit. A *clingy* bathing suit. Jesus, he'd have to kill every man within eyeshot of her. "Holy fuck, I need to stop talking about this. But no, she will not be doing that—piercing that. *Ever*. And if she does, I will dismember the fucker who did it."

"Fine. But we need to figure something out with our kid, Hap. She is wearing me to a nub."

"I don't know why she's taking all this shit out on you and not me, honey."

She turned a skeptical eye on him. "You don't? Really? Because she's Daddy's girl. Besides, I think this is mother-daughter shit. Not that my mother was any help to me. But she's not going to talk to you about clothes, or periods, or anything to do with her body."

Which was exactly how he liked it. He'd noticed—of course he had, even though it made his brain scream—that his daughter was developing a body that on any other woman he would find extremely attractive: a rack, an ass, long legs. Just like her mother. Sometimes he thought about the way men had lusted after Vivian when she'd been on stage—the way *he* lusted after Vivian still, to this day—and his blood boiled at the thought that pigs like him would be thinking about his daughter what he thought about her mother. He

wanted to make her walk around wearing a sign that said *My father has killed 23 men. Do you want to be next?*

But right now, the problem Vivian needed help with was the drama. He thought maybe he could help with that. “Okay. You want me to talk to her?” He girded himself for her response. Sometimes it pissed her off when he suggested that he help, and she went off on a rant about how he got to come in and save the day while she slogged through the shit doing all the real work. But other times he got in trouble for not offering to help. Or not offering the right kind of help.

Really, Hap thought the past few months had been very confusing.

But today Vivian wanted the kind of help he offered. “That would be great. Thanks.”

He put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. “I tell you what. I’ll take her for a ride and a talk, get her out of the house. And don’t fix supper. I’ll order from—what, Thai Palace?”—Vivian smiled and nodded—“and have a Prospect pick it up and bring it over in the van.” Hap wasn’t a fan of Thai food, but Vivian loved it. And he’d deal—he didn’t care that much, as long as there was something with meat in it and he could use a damn fork.

She rested her head on his chest. “Thank you, Hap. I love you.”

“I love you, too, honey. You’re a great mom. And a damn fine old lady.”

Hope wasn’t in her room when Hap went back into the house. She wasn’t in the living room. He checked the garage, where he found her beating the shit out of the heavy bag. She’d gotten good since he’d started her on it, almost two years ago. Used her arms and legs, hands and feet. Threw a good, strong punch. He went and steadied the bag.

“Working somethin’ out, midget?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Daddy. You’ll just come out on her side, anyway.”

He put his shoulder to the bag and held it so that it didn’t give at all when she next came at it. She was expecting some give. Her hand bounced off; she hissed and she shook it. Hap gave her a pointed look. “*Her* is your mother, Hope. You better fuckin’ remember that.”

She just glared at him.

He sighed. “Get your gloves off, get your helmet. Let’s ride.”

Still a sucker for a ride on his bike, she grinned and did as she was told.

-oOo

They rode to Frank and Juice's, to the place by the stream he used to bring her when she ran away from school. They hadn't been here together since he'd gone inside.

They sat together on the rock outcropping. She was a lot bigger than she'd been the last time, her legs now almost as long as his as they sat side by side. The day was a bit breezy, the wind picking up Hope's long black waves and making them dance across her back and around her face. She tucked her hair behind her ears; when that didn't work, she grabbed the mane into her fist and held it.

"Okay, midge. Tell me what's going on with you and your mom. 'Cuz I'm telling you now, the disrespect I see from you is pissin' me off."

Hope had stopped being intimidated by him when she was still small, so hearing that he was pissed didn't even slow her down. She launched right into her tirade. "No fair, Daddy. What about the way she disrespects me? She won't listen to anything I have to say about what I want to do with *my* life, *my* body. She just wants her way. She doesn't care about what I want or what makes me happy. I don't think she gives a crap about me at all."

He really was pissed now. Not irritated—pissed the fuck off. He grabbed her arm and pulled her around to face him. "You listen to me, Hope. Your mother loves you. She cares about you more than anything. And you're damn lucky to have a woman like that for a mother. You have no fuckin' idea what she—" He pulled up short, realizing that she really didn't have any idea what they—what Vivian—had gone through to have her. She knew they'd had a daughter before her, Katherine, who died before she could be born, but they'd never told her the story. She'd always been too young.

She was too young now. There was no such thing as old enough for the story of Katherine, and the consequent story of her own birth. But she needed to hear it. She needed to understand. "I need to tell you some things, midget. It's a long story, and it's gonna be hard to hear. But you need to hear it, all the way through. You can stop me to ask questions, but we're gonna sit here until I finish. Got it?"

She was curious; her brow was furrowed, her head cocked. She nodded. And Hap told her the story of Katherine. He left some of the harshest details out, but he softened very few edges. He started with the men coming into their bedroom. He told her about the concrete room. He told her about holding Katherine's body in his arms. He told her about her mother's pain and how no one thought she could have another baby. He told her what she'd had to go through to stay pregnant with her and get her born. And he told her why there were no more children after her.

Hope never interrupted him. She didn't make a sound at all. But she went pale and her eyes got wide. She looked dazed and maybe a little sick. When he was done, Hap put his hands around her beautiful, young face and said, "Your mother is the strongest woman—no, the strongest *person*—I've ever known. She fought like a warrior for you. She still

fighters for you. You need to understand how fuckin' lucky you are, midge. The love she has for you? Not many in this world get love like that. So when I say it pisses me off to see you disrespecting her, now maybe you understand. Do you understand?"

She nodded, her face still in his hands. Her voice low and unsteady, she said, "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Not me you need to apologize to." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her head. "You're a good girl. I think sometimes you forget that."

He called the Thai Palace order in when they got back to his bike. Then he called and had Kevin pick it up and bring it to the house. They got back just as Kevin was leaving. Hap repaid him and patted him on the back in thanks, and he and Hope went inside.

Vivian was standing at the kitchen counter, sorting through the dinner order. Hope walked up behind her and hugged her. Vivian jumped, then turned and hugged her daughter back.

"I'm really sorry, Mom. I love you."

Vivian gave Hap a bemused smile. "I love you, too, baby." She kissed Hope's cheek.

## 16. Old School

Hap sat at the poker table with his brothers. He was breaking even tonight—fine with him. He was good at poker but not much of a gambler. Seemed like a stupid risk of good money. He considered the buy-in the cost of an enjoyable night with his brothers, and he bet conservatively. He rarely raised. He just chugged along with few expectations other than to stay in the game as long as possible. It drove everybody else crazy, and he got endless shit for being a skinflint—especially when he had a winning night playing like he did.

He liked these poker nights, when the old ladies and kids came to the clubhouse but it wasn't a party. Just the Sons and their families, a few hand-picked 'Eaters. With Chibs' girl off at college this year, even his old lady was starting to come around more often. The women usually put out a pasta dish or something like that. Tonight it was chili and cornbread, one of Hap's favorites.

He heard Abel laughing at the bar and looked up. The kid had been prospecting for more than two years and was pissed not to have his top rocker yet. It was mostly Hap's fault, in fact. He thought 21 was far too young for a patch, third generation or not. He also thought Abel needed a lot more seasoning before he'd trust him as a brother. The kid was still reckless, cocksure, and often walked a fine line where respect was concerned. His patch had been up for a vote three times, and three times he'd been denied. The last vote, Hap had been the only nay, which had shocked him. So far, Jax hadn't put any pressure on him to relent—and that was good, because he would refuse. He would not vote to patch in a man he did not trust.

Prospects weren't allowed to buy into the game, but they had to be around when the Sons were, so Abel and Kevin were shooting the shit at the bar. Hap noticed that Abel seemed to be fixating on something across the room. He turned and followed his sightline, already knowing what he'd see. Hope, wearing her customary jeans, Docs, and t-shirt. She was helping little Nora, just a year old and starting to toddle, walk across the room. Hope was holding Nora's hands. She was bent over, walking away from the part of the room where Abel was standing. Put another way, 21-year-old Abel was watching Hap's 15-year-old daughter's ass. He wasn't even trying to be subtle about it, leaning back against the bar, stupid fucking smirk on his face, not taking his eyes off her as he drank his beer.

That was just about fucking enough. "Fold," Hap muttered and dropped his cards. He walked straight to the bar, keeping his eyes on Abel the whole time. Jax was at the poker table. Hap knew that Jax was aware of and concerned by his eldest son's failings, but Hap wasn't sure how his President would deal with the beatdown Abel was one short step from taking.

As Hap came up to the bar, Abel met his eyes. Upon seeing the death stare, he grinned. "You got a problem, old man?" For about half a second, Hap was shocked. That a

Prospect, any Prospect, even one named Teller, would talk that way to a patch—it boggled the mind.

But Hap only spared the arrogant pup half a second. Then he grabbed him by the throat and bent him back over the bar. He sensed the room behind him—the Sons at the poker table, the women in the kitchen, Hope over with the little ones—become aware that something was up and move toward them. “Yeah, I got a problem, shithead. I see your eyes on my daughter like that ever again, I will cut them out and eat them with salt, like hard-boiled eggs. Do you understand me?”

Abel laughed. “You don’t scare me, old man.”

Christ. The kid had always been brash and obnoxious, but this was a whole new state of audacity—and stupidity. Even Abel Teller was putting his chance at a top rocker on the line to disrespect a patch like this. He had to know it.

And then Hap understood. For Abel, this was *about* his top rocker. Hap had stood in the way of three patch votes. The last one, he’d been alone in the way. But if the kid thought he could use Hope to bring that tension to a head—well, he was right, because Hap was livid, the red beat pulsing behind his eye.

He pulled Abel upright, off the bar, but kept hold of his kutte. “The ring, boy. You take me down, I’ll vote you in. You don’t, you’re my bitch until I’m ready to vote you in. Either way, if I catch you creeping after my girl again, I will shoot you in the head.”

“Daddy!” Hope protested behind him. He ignored her.

He let Abel go, then turned and faced Jax. He said nothing, just held his President’s look. After a few seconds during which Jax and Hap considered each other, Jax nodded and looked at his boy. “The ring, son. You want your patch? Time to put your body where your attitude is. He takes you down, I’ll make sure you’re his bitch.”

Abel glared at his father, then at Hap, then looked around the room. Hap saw him meet Hope’s eyes and linger. He almost took a swing at the little prick right there. What the fuck—was Hope looking *back* at him? Like that? No. *FUCKING*. Way. He turned and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her back to her mother.

Vivian looked worried. That pissed him off, too. “Keep her inside, with you. I don’t want either of you out there watching.”

“Hap, wait—”

“Do what I fuckin’ say, woman!” He rarely spoke to her like that—almost never—and he saw the hurt and anger pass through her eyes. But she nodded and took Hope’s hand. Hap turned and went out to the ring. Abel followed him, catching his blond hair into a ponytail as he went. The rest of the Sons filed out behind them, strangely quiet.

Hap yanked off his kutte and t-shirt and handed them both to Tig. Then he pulled off his rings and handed those over, as well. He stepped between the ropes and waited for Abel. Time for some schooling.

He had more than 40 years on the kid, but he had kept himself in top shape, and those 40 years had been spent beating the crap out of assholes with a whole helluva a lot more cred than this fucking pretty boy who thought he owned the goddamn sun. He wasn't worried. He expected a fight, if only because youth meant resilience, and maybe a bit more speed, but he would die in this ring before he'd go down to Abel Teller.

Abel was in the ring now, bouncing around like he thought he was Muhammad fucking Ali. Hap walked to the center of the ring, his hands up. Abel charged in like a fool and took a big roundhouse right, which Hap easily sidestepped. As Abel was regaining his balance, Hap came in with a jab to his gut. Abel bent over with a "whoof," as the air was forced out of his lungs. Then Hap caught his jaw with a quick uppercut, sending the kid back to the ropes. Hap backed off then. He was just trying to get the kid pissed off.

It worked. Abel came in with a hook to Hap's face. Hap didn't move quite fast enough and took the blow on his chin. Fucking hurt, but no break. Abel tried to go for a combo, sending a cross in, but Hap blocked it and jabbed again, catching Abel squarely in the solar plexus. Body blows. The kid was too stupid and green to understand the beauty of the body blow. The face was flashy, made a mess. But, especially barehanded, punches to the face took as much toll on the puncher as on the punched. Best to save those for the finish.

They danced around for a long time. This was a brawl, a score to settle, not a boxing match, so nobody called rounds. Hap contented himself with wearing Abel out, goading him into stupid swings and then putting him on the ropes with the occasional combination to his torso. He'd only hit that pretty boy face twice. Conversely, he was going to need some stitches when they were done, because almost every contact Abel made was to Hap's face.

A casual observer would think Hap was losing. Abel thought Hap was losing.

Most of the people who'd been at the clubhouse were watching. From the few glances Hap took the time to spare, he thought the only people who'd stayed inside were Tara, Vivian, and Hope. Everybody out here was getting rowdy, making bets—and the vibe was very much in Hap's favor. Everybody knew Abel was a shit.

The spectator sentiment was pissing the kid off. He thought he was winning. He was getting tired, too; Hap could see him flagging. But Abel was angry and starting to feel like his big boy dick was on the line, so he charged Hap again, swinging madly. Hap protected his face and took the blows. He was starting to get tired, too, and his left hand, which had never been the same since the Lobos had broken most of the bones in it, was shrieking at him.

But this is what experience gave him: Will. Endurance. Pride. Not cockiness, but pride, the kind that was earned. When Abel ended the volley of blows and stepped back, clearly winded, Hap went in to end the fight. Abel was surprised; Hap had held back the whole time, waiting for the kid to blow his wad. Now that he had, he couldn't even get his hands back up to block. Hap pummeled his torso, then, when Abel was curled over trying to protect himself, Hap caught him with a forward hand uppercut to the jaw that sent him to the mat.

He struggled up, shaking his head clear. As soon as he was on his feet and looking at Hap, Hap went in for a 1-2 combo, again to the kid's head, putting him down again.

"Stay down," Hap growled.

"Fuck you." Abel's mouth was mushy from that last combination, but the words were clear enough. He got up again. Hap put him down again.

"I said *stay down*."

Abel tried not to. He rolled to his hands and knees in an effort to stand, but he just hung there, weaving slightly with the effort to get his feet under him. Finally, he fell over onto his ass and stayed down. Then Jax and Tig both stepped into the ring. Jax called the fight and went to pull his son up; Tig pushed Hap back to the corner and handed him a towel.

When Abel was on his feet, being held up by his father, Hap called to him, "Get your shit together, boy. You want your top rocker, you fuckin' earn it." Abel didn't even look up, but Jax met Hap's eyes. An understanding passed between them, and Jax nodded. Hap nodded in turn.

-oOo-

Hap was sore as hell that night. His face hurt; it was black and blue, and Tara had put about a dozen stitches in his jaw and brow. He was thinking about just chopping off his left hand, which he couldn't even get open. Thank God he'd driven Vivian's cage to the clubhouse with his girls, instead of following them on his bike or meeting them there, because he wouldn't have been able to ride, and he damn well wouldn't have wanted Abel to see that. He washed down several aspirins with several glasses of Jack, and then Vivian put him to bed.

Hope wasn't speaking to him. She'd been sullen and silent on the ride home and had gone straight to her room. They were going to have to have a talk, because Abel Teller was *not* happening. Not with his daughter. Absolutely not. There were two Teller brothers. Why the fuck would she set her sights on the bad one?

He was still feeling moody, even though Vivian was barely dressed, wearing nothing but a little tank top and underwear, and massaging Icy-Hot into his sore body. She worked

his front, and then his back. When she was finished, she slapped his bare ass. “Okay, Raging Bull, we need to talk. Here—sit up and I’ll massage your hand while we do it.” He rolled over with a groan and sat up. She was squeezing more cream onto her fingers. He held out his sore, still crimped left hand, and she tenderly took it into hers. She was gentle and careful, but as she worked his fingers straight, he leaned over to the nightstand, grabbed his glass, and took another long drink of Jack. That hand didn’t bother him much normally, but fighting fucked it up bad. Made him worry.

Vivian pressed her thumbs into his palm and drew them out over his index finger. “You have to back off the Abel thing, Hap.”

“He’s a shithead, and I’m not going to patch somebody I can’t trust.”

She scoffed at him. “That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

Yeah, he knew. But he’d much rather talk about patching in Abel—or not—than about the kind of attention he was starting to pay to their daughter. “Christ, Vivian. You want her with that asshole? He’s six years older than she is!”

“You’re fourteen years older than me.” She was smirking, looking down at his hand as she massaged it.

“Vivian! That’s fuckin’ different. You were in your 30s when we met. Hope’s fifteen! You can’t want this!”

She stopped massaging his hand and looked at him. She was irritated. Well, fine. So was he. “No, I don’t. Yes, he’s a jerk—he’s young and cocky. But do you really think that matters? Nothing’s even happened between them, and I don’t think Hope is really interested in him. She knows he’s an ass. He was an ass to her for years. She’s not stupid enough to think he actually changed when she got tits.” She started working his fingers again. “But you making a fuss every time he notices that she’s hot—*that’s* going to make her interested. If there is a bud there, and you want to nip it, then what you need to do is back off before you make him a lot more interesting to her.”

“Did you see the look she gave him? Fuck, Vivian. I know that look.”

“Hap, come on. He’s cute, he’s older, and he notices her. She’s fifteen. She’s going to like that, even from Abel.”

“I thought she wanted Thomas,” he grumbled.

“*You* want Thomas.” What the fuck did that mean? He sat up a little and gave her a look, and she laughed. “I mean you want Thomas for Hope, obviously. I don’t think Hope thinks about him like that. I don’t think she really thinks about anybody in particular like that. Not yet, anyway. She’s a lot like you, not really looking to bond. My point is, when

she does like someone, we can't control who it will be. No matter how much we want to."

"Well, it sucks." He flexed his left hand—sore, but moveable again.

"It does." She put the tube of cream on the nightstand, then leaned on him, her lips hovering over his. "You need to get your mind off it. Anything I can do to distract you?" She kissed him, her tongue tracing his lips before sliding gently into his bruised mouth. He groaned and raised his hands to hold her head. She put her hand on his chest and began to slide it down, over his belly, and down some more.

Then he remembered the Icy Hot, and grabbed her hand before it could go farther. "You gotta wash your hands first, honey. Please."

She wrinkled her brow at him, but then she got it and chuckled. "Be right back." She got up and went into the bathroom.

When she came back, she was naked and smiling at him. She leaned on the door jamb, her wild mass of hair pulled over her head to one side. Damn, she was fine.

And very distracting.

## 17. Mirror Image

Hap stood behind Vivian at the bathroom counter. Looking down at the reflection of her face illuminated by the harsh lights over the mirror, he was struck by the hollows in her cheeks. It had all come on so fucking fast.

Fuck this. Just fuck it all straight to hell.

“Honey, you sure about this?”

She smiled, but he saw her lip quiver. She lifted a big pair of silver scissors and said, “Yeah. I’m sure. Might as well take control of it.” She brushed her hair back from her face, dislodging hunks of long, wavy strands. Shaking them free of her fingers, she picked up a hank of that wild hair he loved so much—as much now that it was threaded with grey as he ever had when it was solidly black—and lopped it off near her scalp. He kept his hands on her hips and let the hair fall on and around him as she worked her way around her head until nothing was left of the mane she’d had for the almost 20 years he’d known her. Hell, she’d had it far longer than that—her whole damn life.

Her life.

He caught a tress in his hand as it dropped from the scissors. His fist clenched reflexively around it, and then he threw it to the floor.

When she was done, she faced herself in the mirror. Shaking now, she didn’t even try to smile. She just met his eyes in the glass and said, “Do it.”

He turned on the electric clippers and shaved her head, making long, slow, careful sweeps from front to back. Standing stoic and still, but for the slight quiver running through her body, she watched in the mirror the whole time. He couldn’t meet her eyes; the lump in his throat was too close to becoming something more. So he focused on his task.

When he was done, he set down the clippers and faced her in the mirror. He put his hands on her scalp and caressed her tender skin. She met his eyes and tried on a brave smile. It broke, though, and she folded to the sink in tears. He bent over her, holding her close. “I love you, Vivian. I love you. You are beautiful. It doesn’t matter.”

She laughed, the sound thick with sorrow. “I know I’m being vain and stupid. I know. It’s just hair. But . . .” She didn’t finish; her tears had come on too heavy for speech.

Hap pulled her up and turned her around so he could hold her properly. He kissed her scalp. His heart was breaking, but he found a way to laugh. “Hey—we have the same style now. All you’re missing is the snake.”

She pulled back and looked up at him, her eyes wet and swollen. “Let’s do it.”

“What? No, Vivian. I was joking.”

He saw the set of her jaw and knew what she was going to say. “Well, I’m not. Get your stuff. I want a snake on my scalp.”

“Honey, no. It’s the wrong time for any ink. Your immune system is fucked. And, anyway, scalp tats fucking hurt.”

“I don’t care. I want you to ink me.”

He pushed away from her. “No, Vivian. I won’t. I couldn’t stand it if it made you sicker.”

“Fuck you! It doesn’t fucking matter.” She yanked the towel from around her shoulders and stormed out of the bathroom.

Hap let her go. He felt dizzy with emotion and dropped to a squat in the middle of the bathroom, wrapping his arms around his head. He was ankle deep in what had been his wife’s wild, beautiful hair. He’d been living in a haze of anger, fear, worry, guilt—he couldn’t even name it all—for the past, what? four weeks?, since Vivian had gone in for a routine mammogram and hell broke loose. They’d found a mass. It had been malignant. They’d removed it, but the cancer was in her lymph nodes, too. And then they’d found another mass, elsewhere. And another.

Stage fucking four.

So now they were poisoning her. Aggressively.

He hated it. He’d hated it when it was happening to his mother, but now it was right up in the middle of his damn life, threatening to destroy everything. And the “treatment” was fucking medieval, making her far sicker than anything else. He was livid, all the time, a constant, bloody beat in the back of his eyes. Vivian wouldn’t let him go with her to her treatments anymore, because he scared the hospital staff. He hated that, too, most of all, not being with her when she so clearly needed him, but he couldn’t seem to control his rage there. He needed to do violence, and they were the ones actually hurting her.

He took several deep breaths and located some calm so he could clean up and go out and see to his wife. He gathered up all of the long locks she’d cut away. He couldn’t discard them; he couldn’t. Instead, he arranged them into a bundle and wrapped one of her hair elastics around it. Then he cleaned up the leavings from the trimmer.

When he went out to the bedroom, she was lying in bed, her back to the bathroom door, curled into a ball. He had the bundle of her hair in his hand. He gave it a kiss and put it into one of his drawers. As he started to unbutton his jeans, walking around the bed to get in with her, there was a faint knock at the door.

Hap buttoned back up, took another calming breath, and opened the door a crack. He didn't want Hope to see her mom right now. "Hey, midge. It's almost 3am. What are you doing up?" She was taller than her mother these days, but he'd always call her "midget." Hap was often struck by how eerily like Vivian she looked, especially that long, black, wild h—.

Fuck. Just *fuck*.

"Couldn't sleep. Is Mom okay, Daddy? I thought I heard her crying." Hap could see that his daughter had been doing some crying herself, and he opened the door and stepped out to take her in his arms. Tears didn't come easily to Hope, not until this past month. She rested her head on his chest right away, her arms around his waist, grabbing handfuls of his t-shirt.

He kissed her temple. "She's feeling down right now, but she's okay." That was such a fucking lie, but he didn't know what else to say. Then, behind him, the bedroom door opened, and Vivian was standing there. Hope pulled back from her father and took her mother in. Hap saw her eyes go wide.

"What do you think, baby?" Vivian smiled; Hap was impressed by how natural that smile looked. Vivian had a real skill in burying her own needs and feelings and fronting for her daughter.

At first Hope said nothing. She just sort of gaped at her mother. Then she smiled. "You look badass, Mommy. It's totally rad. Really." She stepped in and gave her mother a big, gentle hug.

Hap was proud; his girl was a good girl. The best girl. Brave, strong, and kind. But he could hear her fear, too. She hadn't called Vivian "Mommy" since she was five years old. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Come on, midget. You need to get some sleep. School tomorrow." She kissed her mother on the cheek and let her father lead her back to her room.

He tucked her in—another thing that hadn't happened since she was five years old, when she'd pronounced solemnly that she was too old for it. He kissed her forehead and whispered, "Good night, midge. Love you."

She grabbed his hand as he turned to go. "Daddy, wait. Don't go yet. I'm scared."

Fuck. He knew what she needed, but he didn't know if he could give it to her. Keeping hold of her hand, he sat down on the edge of her bed. "What are you scared of?"

"She's dying, right? I mean, she looks like she's dying. She doesn't look like Mom at all." She started to cry. "It's so fast, though. It seems like she was okay, like, *yesterday*. Daddy, I'm so scared."

It *was* fast. It scared the blazing shit out of him, too. He was fucking terrified. And when it really came to it, he couldn't lie to his girl. "I don't know. I wish I did, midge, I really wish I did. I'm scared, too." She looked up, startled. "I am. I love your mom like crazy. You know that. Thinking of being without her . . ." He brushed her hair back and tucked it behind her ear. Christ, she had Vivian's hair *exactly*. It hurt like hell to see that right now. "It's the medicine, though, that's making her look so sick. So maybe that means we don't have as much to worry about as we think. But I don't know."

He lifted her chin so that she'd meet his eyes "What I do know is that we have to be strong for her. And for each other. You and me, we can talk like this. Come to me, and I will be here for you. But we need to be strong for your mom. I don't want her feeling guilty on top of everything else. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded, and then the tears came hard. He pulled his little girl into his arms and let her cry.

Her tears abated a little, and she whispered against his chest, "Daddy?"

"Yeah, midge?"

"You know, last month, those boots I wanted that Mom said I couldn't have because they looked like something a hooker would wear?"

Hap smiled against her hair. No, he had no idea what boots she was talking about, but he could absolutely hear the fight in his head. It was very familiar; with some interchangeable details, it was the same fight mother and daughter—and occasionally father—had been having since Hope hit her teens. "What about 'em?"

She was quiet for several seconds. He was about to check if she'd fallen asleep. Then he heard, low, "I told her I hated her. I called her a bitch." Big sobs now.

That was less familiar. Since last year, when Hope had learned about Katherine, she had been much more respectful to her mother, even though they still fought. Vivian hadn't said anything about this little episode. If she had, Hap would have had some firm words for his daughter to remind her about respect. But this wasn't the time for firm words. "She knows you didn't mean it, midget. She knows you love her. But you should still apologize, right?"

He felt her nodding. "Okay, try to get some sleep now. Gotta be up in just a few hours." He kissed her forehead and tucked her in again. This time, still sniffing, she let him go.

When he got back to the bedroom, he was wrung out. Vivian was sitting up in bed, propped against the brass headboard. "She okay?"

“Yeah. Worried about you. But okay.” He pulled off his jeans and t-shirt and got into bed. He pulled his woman into his arms. “Hey—when the chemo’s over, I will gladly ink a snake into your scalp, if you still want it. When you’re better.”

She smiled wearily. “I’m not going to get better, Hap. That’s the thing. Stage four. You know it. They’re talking in terms of months. A year at the outside. I don’t know why I’m even fucking going through this hellish chemo.”

“Because you have a daughter and a husband who fucking need you, that’s why. It’s not an automatic death sentence. You need to fuckin’ *fight*.”

Her laugh was harsh. “Yeah, okay.”

He turned and took her face in his hands, staring hard at her. “Vivian, please. Fight for us. We’d be lost without you. I can’t raise Hope without you—Christ, woman. Think of the ways I can screw up a 16-year-old girl. She needs you. *I fucking need you*. The man I am without you should not be a father. You know this.”

Her hands wrapped around his wrists and she looked back at him just as intently. “I’m fighting, Hap. I’m fighting. But if you need to, you’ll still be a wonderful father even without me. You will be the father Hope needs. You always have been. You’ll be okay without me.”

No, he wouldn’t. Unwilling to listen to any more of that shit, he rasped, “Christ, shut up. Shut up. Shut the fuck up.” He kissed her hard, pushing his tongue deep into her mouth. She moaned and wrapped her arms around him, pressing the flats of her palms on his back.

He pulled back, unsure if she was strong enough to go where they were headed. “Okay?”

Nodding, she whispered, “Please.”

Shifting her down so that she was flat underneath him, his hands cradling her newly bare scalp, Hap made love to his wife, the great love of his life, the only woman he would ever love. He loved her slow and deep, giving her all the pleasure he had to give, as if he might not get the chance again.

## 18. Last Wish

Hap pulled up the long gravel driveway at Frank and Juice's, feeling restless and irritated. Since Vivian had gotten sick, he hated to be away from home, and he made a point never to be away longer than he had to. When Frank had called earlier in the day and said it was important for him to come out, he'd ascertained that she and her kids were neither sick nor hurt, and then he'd refused. But she'd insisted, and the little shit could be annoyingly persistent. So he was here, and ready to be gone. He dismounted and walked up to the back door. They had a front door, but he couldn't think of a time anyone had used it.

He went in. Before he could call out a greeting, he heard Nora shriek. It set his fight response off at first, but then he recognized the sound of a two-year-old not getting her way. He smiled a little and waited for her to take a breath. When she did, he called out, "I'm here, little girl!"

A few minutes later, Nora was still screaming, but Frank came into the dining room alone. She was in her early 40s now, but she still looked like a kid. Tiny and slim. She wore her hair shorter than she used to, and she now favored jeans and t-shirts over torn fishnets and miniskirts, but she hadn't changed much, really. "Hey—sorry. Naptime. She votes nay."

He nodded and crossed his arms. "I can tell. So, I'm here. What's so important? 'Cuz I'm not staying long."

Gesturing at the table, Frank said, "Have a seat." She turned and headed to the kitchen. Feeling even more irritated and restless, Hap huffed and then pulled out a chair and sat down. He crossed his arms again. There was an almost tangible break in the decibel level as Nora apparently decided her protests were of no use. Or the nap had happened despite them.

When Frank came back, she was carrying a small shopping bag. She set it down in front of him and then took a seat in the chair immediately to his left. Without saying anything, she removed the contents of the bag: among them a plastic tub with what looked like mud in it, some small sheets of plastic, and a syringe.

Hap was intrigued, anyway, because it looked for all the world like Frank was about to suggest they shoot up mud together. "What's all this?"

"This," she lifted the plastic tub, "is henna paste. Do you know what mehndi is?" He shook his head.

"It's henna tattooing—superficial and temporary, but pretty long lasting. It stains the skin, lasts a couple of weeks. One of the girls who works for me is Indian, and her mother does mehndi. I asked her to show me how, and now I can show you how."

He shook his head again, not getting the picture. Why would he want to learn Indian temporary tattooing? Then he got it. Oh, shit. “Little girl . . .”

“When you told me about Viv wanting a snake like yours on her scalp, it got me thinking. And then Lali came in after having been to a festival or something, with beautiful mehndi on her hands and arms, and she told me her mother had done it. So I asked her mom to teach me.”

He couldn't speak. He just sat there like an idiot, staring at the tub of brown paste, willing the lump in his throat away. Frank put her hand on his arm. “You can give her the tattoo she wants. You can practice on me. Okay?”

He nodded.

-oOo-

When he got home a few hours later, Vivian was lying on the sofa in the living room, reading. She was so damn thin. Somehow, without her hair her whole body looked more frail. Hope was working until closing at Level Up, Frank's comic and game shop, and had gone straight from school, so Vivian had been alone all day. He hated leaving her alone. He hoped it was worth it. He went in and kissed her forehead. “Hey, honey. How you doin'?”

She closed her book and sat up. “I'm okay. Thought you'd be home earlier. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. I went out to Frank's for a while. I think I've got something for you.” He sat down next to her and put the bag Frank had given him on his lap.

She cocked her head. “You think? What is it?”

He pulled the tub of paste out of the bag. “Do you know what mehndi is?”

She nodded but was obviously still confused.

“I learned how to do it today. Vivian, if you still want the snake, I can do it this way.”

She stared at the tub, much like he had. Then she started to cry. *Shit. Shit.* “I'm sorry, honey. I thought—I'm sorry.”

Laying her hand on his leg, she shook her head. “No, Hap. Don't be sorry. It's perfect. It's *perfect.*”

Relief made him woozy. Relief and sorrow. “You up to doing it now? We can do it in the kitchen. Then it'll need to sit for a few hours to get the stain to last.”

She nodded. He stood and helped her up. He got her comfortable at the kitchen table and set up the supplies the way Frank had shown him. She'd also given him a photograph she had that showed the top of his head. Hap didn't really see the top of his own head, so he was glad to have the reference. If, that is, Vivian wanted a snake just like his.

"Do you want a snake of your own, or do you want one like mine?"

She picked up the photograph and smiled. "Like yours, if you can."

"Well, your head's a lot smaller than mine, but I think I can get close." He looked down at her. "You trust me to freehand it?"

"I always trust you."

He laughed and leaned down to kiss her. "My girl."

It had taken some practice at Frank's to figure out how to manage the paste and the syringe and make straight lines. But he had strong, steady hands, and once he got the movement right, he had it. His snake was elaborate, and he took care to replicate it as much as he could on his wife's smaller head, checking the photograph occasionally.

Vivian sat calmly still as while he worked. There was something really intimate about standing over her, her face at his belly, his free hand gently cradling the back of her head, as he applied the paste carefully to her soft, naked scalp. At some point, she hooked her fingers into his belt and let her arm hang. He found the gesture sweet.

When he was finished, he walked with her to the bathroom so she could see what he'd done. She approved. Frank had shown him how to wrap the design while the paste set, but he didn't think he'd need to wrap Vivian's head. They went to the living room and curled up on the couch together to watch television.

Hap tucked her close, under his arm. They stayed there for the rest of the evening. He didn't know how much longer he'd get to be close like this with his wife. So far, the chemo didn't seem to be doing anything but making her miserable. But he had to believe she'd be okay. She had to be. She hadn't even been sick until they started trying to make her well.

Hap usually went to pick Hope up from work, but tonight he had Kevin do it. When she came in, she stood quietly in the doorway to the living room. She seemed to be adjusting to the idea that her mom was sick; she was behaving like Hope again. But sometimes, like now, she looked at her mom and got pensive. Vivian sat up, lifting Hap's arm from her shoulders. "Hey, baby. You have a good day?"

"It was okay. Slow at the shop, got all my homework done—wait. Mom, what'd you do to your head?"

“Your dad gave me a henna tattoo—a snake like his. Like it?” Hap turned on the lamp on the end table so Hope could see it.

She came over and took a closer look. “Oh my *God*, that’s totally *rad*. Mom, you’re *so cool!*”

Hap spoke up. “We can take the paste off, I think. The tattoo is under it. Want to watch?”

“Definitely! Daddy—would you do a tattoo like that for me? That would be okay, wouldn’t it? Please?”

He hadn’t thought of that, but it was a good compromise for Hope, too. He really owed Frank. “That I’ll do. Let me figure out how to get more paste, and then we can do the one you drew, if you still want that one.”

“That’s awesome, Daddy! Thank you, thank you!” She ran over and kissed his head. Laughing, he stood and helped Vivian up.

After he removed the paste, an elaborate rusty-brown snake stayed behind, coiled on Vivian’s scalp. “Oh, Hap, I love it. It’s exactly right. Thank you so much.” He pulled her close and just held on. He was more grateful to Frank than he would ever be able to express.

Hope took photos of them with their matching snakes, and then she went off to bed. Hap took his wife to bed, then, too. They didn’t sleep right away. They didn’t fuck; Vivian wasn’t strong enough right now for that. They talked. She’d become reflective and nostalgic in the months since her diagnosis and had taken to lying in bed with him at night and reminiscing about their lives. Part of him hated it, because he understood why she wanted these memories to be fresh. No—all of him hated it. He hated it so fucking much. But he also loved it, holding his wife in their bed, remembering together their happiness. When she was ready to sleep, she rolled to her side, and Hap pulled her back against his chest, holding her tight to him. He kissed his mark where he’d inked it on her back, years ago.

He would hold onto her. He would not let her go. He would not.

He would not.

## 19. No Goodbye

The cancer didn't kill her; the cure got to her first.

Vivian was nearing the end of the first round of chemo, and it was kicking her ass. She spent most of her time in bed or in the bathroom. Hap was staying home with her, handling everything, making sure she was as comfortable as he could make her, trying to give her whatever she needed, trying to keep Hope's life as close to normal as they could manage.

He'd gotten Hope off to school in the morning. It had been a comparatively regular morning—she'd been running late, and she'd kicked up a stink because she wouldn't have been late if her infuriating, unreasonable parents would just let her have a car—or better yet, a bike—so there had been a pretty familiar fight with a sassy teenager. Hap had enjoyed it; he loved to see his daughter's fire, especially these days.

He'd kissed her on the forehead and swatted her rear as he sent her out the door to the bus stop. Then he'd cleaned up the kitchen and poured a small glass of apple juice for Vivian. It was usually all she could tolerate in the morning.

He couldn't rouse her. She was curled up, buried under the covers, shivering. Her eyes were open, but she didn't see him. When he'd put his hand on her, he felt fire under his palm. He didn't need a thermometer to know her fever was off the charts. His first thought was to scoop her up and carry her to her car, but he didn't think she could sit up, and he didn't want to leave her alone in the backseat while he drove. He called 911.

-oOo-

Septic shock. She'd come close to dying from it once before, long ago, when she'd been stabbed in the gut by her ex. But she'd been so much stronger then. Now, every nurse and doctor he came into contact with looked at him with an infuriating blend of pity and fear. And her oncologist had not yet hit the scene.

Vivian was lying unconscious in yet another hospital bed. He'd sat next to her in too many rooms like this during their life together. He knew this would be the last one. He could look at her and know. This was where he would say goodbye.

He had to get Hope here. But he didn't want to leave Vivian, and he didn't want to tell Hope in a phone call. He stepped into the hall just outside Vivian's door and dialed his cell.

Frank answered. "Hey, Happy. Everything okay?" Frank was the only person he would consider calling right now. He was closer to her than to anyone other than Vivian and Hope. He looked on her as a daughter. She was the only person who knew everything that was going on. And she was listed at the high school as family with pick-up clearance.

“I need a favor. It’s big.”

“Fuck. It’s Viv, isn’t it? I can hear it in your voice. Fuck. Tell me.”

“Hope needs to get to St. Thomas. I know she was supposed to work today, but can you get someone to cover her shift—and yours, too, I guess—and bring her here?”

“Fuck all that. I’m closing the shop as we speak. I’ll have her there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, little girl.” She’d always be “little girl” to Hap. He had trouble even thinking of her as Frank.

“You want me to call in the troops?”

His first impulse was to say absolutely not. He didn’t need a crowd of Sons watching this scene unfold. But if this was the end, then Hope needed more than his sorry, cold shoulder. He didn’t know if he’d be able to be there for her the way she’d need him. He was already fighting the impulse to close up shop in his heart. How the fuck he would survive this and be fit to take care of his daughter he had no idea. “Yeah.”

“I’ll put Juice on it. Hey—what do you want me to tell her?”

It didn’t matter. Hope would know as soon as she was told she was being picked up. “She’ll know when she sees you. But just say her mom needs her.”

“Her dad, too.”

“No. Don’t say that. No.”

There was a long pause before Frank spoke again. “Okay. On my way now. I love you.”

“Me too.”

-oOo-

Hope didn’t cry. She came in ahead of Frank and went straight into Hap’s arms. But she didn’t cry. He held her, forcing back the lump in his own throat and the itchiness behind his eyes. And then he led her to the chair he’d placed next to his own. They sat together, holding hands, watching Vivian.

Frank walked up behind him and leaned down to kiss his cheek. “We’re all just across the hall. I’ll make sure everybody leaves you alone, but we’re there if you need us.” He nodded, and she quietly left the room.

He and Hope had been sitting there for only a couple of hours when Vivian took an odd breath and moaned. Then alarms started going off on the various pieces of equipment

attached to her. Within moments, he and his daughter were being shepherded out of the room by a crew of medical personnel. And, finally, Dr. Miller, Vivian's actual oncologist, made an appearance.

Hap stood in the hallway. He saw that his brothers were clustering around the entrance to the waiting room, but he turned his back on them and focused on the window in the door to his wife's room. Hope stood with him, squeezing his hand tightly.

He saw it happen through the window—a change in the urgency of the action inside. The alarms stopped sounding, but abruptly, as if they'd been turned off.

There had been no chance to say goodbye.

And then Dr. Miller was walking toward the door. He came out and said simply, "I'm sorry, Mr. Lowman."

And Hap lost his shit.

This man *poisoned* his wife. The cancer hadn't fucking killed her. This man who couldn't even be bothered to show up for *hours* had filled his wife with poison, made her miserable for months, and then killed her.

And Hap had fucking let it happen.

He pushed his daughter back out of the way and grabbed the much smaller man by the throat. He threw him into the wall. Far off in a distant corner of his head, he heard Hope cry, "Daddy, please—no!" He couldn't have cared less. He leapt onto Miller's fallen form and started pounding, putting every drop of hate and grief that was churning in his blood into each swing. His left hand was screaming; he welcomed the pain.

Then he felt all kinds of hands and arms on him, and he was being pulled away. He wasn't done. He needed to kill that motherfucker. He fought as hard as he could until he was on the ground, buried under the knees and hands of his brothers. Jax's face came into view. "Jesus Christ, Hap. Jesus Christ. You gotta come down."

Sitting up and shaking his brothers off, he saw Gemma and Tara helping the doctor up. He looked bloody and shaken, but nowhere near damaged enough.

Jax squatted down and looked Hap in the eye. "You cool now, Hap?" He nodded. Jax stood and went over to Miller and the women. They talked for awhile, and Hap watched suspiciously, still sitting on the floor where his brothers had put him. He saw the doctor nod, and Jax put his hand on his shoulder. Then the Sons President ambled back.

"He's not pressing charges. Jesus, Hap. What would Hope have done if you'd gotten hauled in right now?"

Hope. He hadn't even thought of her since he'd pushed her out of the way. He really was unfit to be her father without Vivian to make him strong. He'd always known it was true. Anything good in him had come from his wife. He looked to his left and saw their daughter. She was crying, bent over, so Frank—much shorter than Hope—could hold her and comfort her.

He was not fit. Without his wife, he was barely human.

He stood and walked into Vivian's room. She was alone in there now. The machines had been detached and pushed away. She was still and pale. No—that wasn't right. She was gone. This was just the shell she'd left behind. But he leaned over and kissed it anyway.

The hands that had run over his skin so many thousands of times. The fingers he'd folded in his own. The chest that had held such a strong, loving heart. The eyes that had seen more deeply into him than anyone. The lips. Her soft, sweet lips.

He picked up her slack hand and held it to his cheek. "I love you, honey. I love you so much. I can't—I can't—fuck, I just *can't* without you."

He slid her wedding ring off her finger; it came smoothly, without resistance. He kissed the palm of that hand and laid it gently back on the bed. With one, last, lingering kiss to her bare scalp, the faint traces of the mehndi tattoo still visible, he turned and walked away from her body. He left the room, turned away from his brothers, his daughters, his loved ones, and left the hospital.

-oOo-

He didn't have his bike. He didn't have her cage. He'd come with her in the ambulance. So he just started walking, with the vague idea that he'd head home for his bike and then start riding.

He'd only gone a mile or so before he was cut off by Frank's truck. He just walked around, but she jumped out and stood in his path. At another time, he might have seen some humor in this tiny woman trying to slow him down. But he just picked her up, set her aside, and kept walking.

She ran up and did it again. This time, he grabbed her harder and lifted her to eye level. He let his rage show. He was in a mayhem frame of mind.

Frank didn't intimidate easily, though, despite her small stature. "You gonna hurt me, too, asshole?"

He faltered and set her down. "Get away, little girl. I need some room."

She hit him in the chest with the flats of both hands. "Tough shit, Happy. You can't have room. You have things you need to do. You need to go back and help your daughter. She

just lost her mom, and now her dad ran away from her. Don't you dare fuck her up like that, you selfish piece of shit. Don't you dare."

He had no place to put this fucking rage. His hands were clenched so tight he could feel his fingernails piercing the flesh of his palms. He didn't know if Frank realized how close he was to losing control and just lashing out with those fists, but she stood stalwart and faced him down.

"*FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!*" He dropped to a squat and wrapped his arms around his head. When he felt Frank's hands on him, stroking his back, the churning tsunami of grief crashed over him and he sobbed. For the third time in his adult life, he cried, and this time, for the first time, he cried without restraint.

He had no idea how long they stayed on the shoulder of the road like that. Eventually, his aging knees gave out, and he landed on his ass. Frank just went with him and kept her arms around him. When he had nothing left, he lifted his head and looked at her.

"Okay. Okay. Let's go back."

-oOo-

Vivian was the old lady of the SAMCRO Vice President. Her funeral wasn't like a Son's funeral, but representative members from charters all over the country came to pay their respects.

Hap sat at the graveside between Hope and Frank, holding their hands. Hope sat as stoically as her father through the service. Just as stoically, she stood at his side in the clubhouse afterward, too, as patch after patch and old lady after old lady came up to speak empty words of condolence.

It was the longest, more gruesome day of Hap's entire fucking life. Not even the day he'd stood before the five caskets holding his grandmother, mother, sister, and nephews had torn him apart the way watching Vivian get lowered into the ground had. Not even that day in the concrete room.

He wasn't coming back from this. He knew he wasn't. He was swimming in red fury and pain. Hope would drown in it. Without Vivian to balance him, he would ruin the beautiful, perfect girl they'd made together.

He found Frank and pulled her aside. "Take her home with you."

"Happy, no. She needs you." She grabbed his arm.

It wasn't up for discussion, and he shook her off roughly. "Take her home with you." He walked out of the clubhouse, mounted his bike, and rode away.

## 20. Lost Hope

Hope hadn't heard from her father in more than three months. Not since the day they buried her mother. No one had. Even Juice hadn't tracked him down, though he was still trying. No one even knew if he was still alive.

Frank and Juice had brought her to their home from her mother's wake, and she had not stepped a foot in the house she'd grown up in since. Juice and Frank had gone over to collect the things she needed. As time passed, and her father didn't come home, they'd gone over several times; now, most of her belongings were at their house, and they referred to their guest room as her room.

For now, the Sons were taking care of the house. Kevin and Abel had cleaned the rotting food out, and they were keeping the lawn mowed. The club was paying for its upkeep. But that wouldn't last much longer. Hope didn't really care.

She had managed to finish out her junior year with her grades more or less intact. Didn't really matter; she wasn't going back. No point. Her mother was dead, her father was gone, and she was 17—she'd had a birthday since he'd left. She didn't have to go back if she didn't want to. She didn't want to.

Darcy and her family moved to Nebraska right after school let out. Thomas was staying in Los Angeles to work at a law firm over the summer.

Her mother was dead. Her father was . . . just gone.

Hope was alone.

She was surrounded by overprotective uncles and aunts. She had Grandma Gemma. She was working full time at Level Up. She had dinner with Frank, and usually with Juice, every night. She babysat Leo and Nora, whom she adored, all the time.

But she was completely, utterly alone.

-oOo-

She was sitting on the rock outcropping over the stream on Frank and Juice's property. It was where her father used to take her when he wanted to have a Big Talk. Since she'd been living here, she'd found herself drawn to this spot. She felt a little closer to her parents here. It made her sad—well, sadder, really—but it filled something up a little, too. At first, she came out empty-handed and just sat, but lately, she'd been bringing out paper and pencil with her, either drawing or writing. She wrote poetry. It was all angry death shit, and she knew it sucked, but it made her feel better to write it.

She didn't think she was an especially good artist, either, but she was a decent mimic, and an elaborate doodler. It didn't matter to her if she was any good. It made her feel a little better to do it.

Closer to her parents.

She missed them both more than she could really think about. She wished she'd known how to be a better daughter. She was always in trouble. Her whole life, she'd been trouble. She could never figure out how to get along with most people. The kids in school, their parents, the teachers—they all seemed alien to her somehow. The way they dressed, the things they liked, even the way they talked was different from what she knew. She just didn't understand them. She felt angry all the time when she was away from family.

Maybe her father would have stayed if she hadn't been so hard to deal with.

It was getting hot, even under the trees next to the stream, so she picked her stuff up and headed for the house. She heard a bike coming up the drive—had to be a visitor, because Juice was on a run. She was alone at the house—Frank had taken Leo and Nora to the Sacramento Zoo. Hope had declined the invitation, feeling particularly glum. She really loved them, and she tried to act okay around them, but she didn't think she was doing a very good job.

When she cleared the woods and could see the yard and driveway, she saw Abel dismounting his bike. She made a face. He was starting to hang around a lot since summer started. He was totally hot—like Brad Pitt when he was in that old cowboy movie Aunt Tara liked, before he got old and gross. Fall of Legends or something. But he was also totally full of himself. He'd been better for awhile, and he was hilariously afraid of her father, but since he'd disappeared, Abel had been back to his usual jerky self. He'd finally gotten his patch last week, so who knew what new level of conceited he would find now.

He'd picked on her like crazy when she was little. Now all he did was smirk at her boobs. She wasn't in the mood for him when she was in a good mood. She was really not in the mood for him now.

She sighed and walked over to where he was leaning against his bike. He grinned at her. "Hey, girl. You busy today?"

"I got things, yeah. What do you need?"

"Nothin'. Just wonderin' if you want to take a ride."

She was tempted, even though it was Abel. She hadn't been on a bike since her father left, and it was one of her favorite things to do. Then she had a thought. "Got a better idea. Why don't you teach me to ride?"

His grin was sly. “Just jump on behind me and hold on tight. You know that.”

“No, moron. Teach me to *ride*. By myself.”

She’d surprised him; she was glad of it. He considered her for a few seconds. “Girls don’t belong up front. They call it riding bitch for a reason.”

Her father wouldn’t let her learn to ride, either. He’d never said it like that, but she knew he felt the same way. Whatever. “Welp, then I’m not interested. See you later, Abel.” She turned and headed back toward the house.

“Hold up, hold up.” He trotted up alongside her. “Tell you what. I’ll take you someplace where I can teach you to ride on your own. That means you ride with me to get there and back.”

“Why not teach me here—we’re in the country, lots of space.”

“You don’t want to learn on gravel, babe. That’s the deal. You ride with me, I teach you.” He cocked his head a little. “And I want a kiss, too.”

Hope had never kissed anyone. She couldn’t think of anyone she wanted to kiss. She knew it wasn’t Abel, though.

But did it really matter? No, not much. Nothing really did. “You know you’re a jerk, right? But okay. You teach me, *then* you get a kiss. One. Just a kiss.”

“Deal.” He held out his hand. She shook it. He pulled her close and looked into her eyes. Geez, he really thought he was smooth. Then he led her back to his bike and gave her his helmet. “Let’s ride.” He mounted his bike.

She’d never been on a bike with anyone but her father before. She climbed on behind Abel and wrapped her arms around his waist.

**THE END**