

**LOST HOPE**  
*A Sons of Anarchy Story*  
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*Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.*  
~Maya Angelou

**CHAPTER 1—Hope:**

Abel rode Hope about 20 minutes farther outside Charming from Frank and Juice's place, to a failed subdivision near Stockton, where the streets had all been laid but no houses ever built.

It wasn't a bad ride. Abel wasn't as big as Hope's father; in fact, he was only maybe two inches taller than she was, so on the raised bitch seat, she saw a lot more of the trip than she did riding with her dad. She got more sense of speed, too. It was pretty cool. Abel didn't try anything douchey, either, like taking turns super fast (which she'd been totally prepared for him to do). He was almost being a gentleman. Weird.

He rode all the way to the far end of the subdivision, past scrubby, overgrown lots with tall weeds already gone dry and brown in the California heat and sun. Turning into what would have become a cul du sac if houses had ever been built on it, he pulled up. As soon as he stopped, she released her hands from around his waist and swung off his bike. He stayed astride and looked at her, his long blond hair windblown, strands loose from the band that held his hair in a ponytail on the back of his head. He took his sunglasses off and hooked a stem through his kutte pocket. Then he just grinned at her, his blue eyes twinkling.

She had to admit he was hot. Too bad he knew it.

Still wearing his helmet, she put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "So, you got me to ride with you way out here. Now it's time for your part of the deal. Teach me to ride."

"Bossy little bitch, ain't ya?" He winked.

Her father would rip his nose off for talking to her like that. Except her father wasn't here. No one knew where her father was. He'd disappeared the day they'd buried her mother, and no one had heard from him since. More than three months ago.

She was on her own.

"Call me bitch again, asshole, and I'll punch you in the ear."

He hooted. “Damn, girl. Alright, alright. C’mere.” The bike was still running. She took a step toward him, her hands still on her hips. “You know how to drive?”

She shook her head. Her mom had gotten sick before she could learn. After her mom was sick, there was no way her father would consider letting her do anything remotely dangerous. So no, she didn’t know how to drive.

Abel rolled his eyes. “Shit. Well, okay. Start at the basics, then. Left foot—gears.” She looked, and he kicked the gear shift with his heavy, black boot. “First is lowest, then neutral, then second, and so on. Left hand—clutch. You have to engage the clutch by squeezing and releasing here”—he squeezed the lever on the handlebar—“before you change gears. They work together, though; you can feel when it engages.”

“I can’t feel anything. You’re the one on the bike.”

“We’ll get to it. Pay attention.” He nodded to the right, and she walked around the bike. “Right side is brakes. Right foot—rear brake.” He kicked it. “Right hand—front brake. You don’t want to engage the front brake first—put you right over the top of the bike, maybe bring the bike over with you. Always brake the rear first. Like with a bicycle. Right hand is also the accelerator.” He revved the engine to demonstrate.

Most of this she kinda knew, just from watching her dad and uncles riding her whole life. She wanted her hands on the handlebars. She’d never had hold of the handlebars when the engine was running. “Got it. Let me try.”

He kicked the stand down and dismounted. She straddled the bike and sat in the place he’d vacated, her hands on the controls. Abel’s bike wasn’t quite as big as her dad’s, but it wasn’t small. New, too. His parents had given it to him as a gift when he’d gotten his patch. Big, blacked out, and already with SOA tank art. All the Sons did custom tank art. Abel’s was the initials *S. O. A.* with the Reaper in the *O.* Kinda cool.

She revved the engine. Wow.

“Now hold up, don’t get ahead of yourself. I break you and the whole club’ll have my ass. Might anyway, just for letting you do this. First I want you to feel the clutch engage.”

She learned the controls, and finally Abel let her roll. The bike was heavier than she’d expected and felt more powerful from this position than it did from the bitch seat. He made her practice stopping and starting more than anything, keeping it running at low speeds. She didn’t get much distance. She had it in her head that she’d be able to learn today and just be able to ride. No, that wouldn’t be the case at all. It was a lot harder than she’d thought.

But it was rad. Her heart was pounding, and she felt better than she had since everything ended.

After about half an hour, Abel called it. “Okay, girl. That’s enough. Lesson One is over.” He reached over and turned off the engine.

“Lesson One? That mean you’ll teach me till I can really ride?” She was grinning; she couldn’t help it. She was kinda digging Abel right at this moment.

He kicked the stand down for her and took her arm, leading her to dismount. Then he leaned into her, forcing her to sit back down, sidesaddle. He unfastened the helmet and pulled it off her head, setting it on the handlebars. Out of habit, she shook her curls loose. His eyes flared at that.

“I don’t know. You haven’t paid up for this lesson yet.” Oh, right. The kiss. He wanted a kiss as compensation for teaching her to ride. Abel was staring at her mouth; his tongue came out and wet his lips. Was she supposed to wet hers? She didn’t know. She was more nervous than she’d expected she would be. She didn’t even like him; she didn’t want to kiss him.

Except, right now? She kinda did. She’d just had *fun*. It had been a long time since she’d had fun. And he’d been cool. Not a jerk at all. A little funny, even. And then his hand was on her neck, his fingers sliding into her hair, holding her head. He still had his gloves on. It felt . . . good. Really good, somehow.

She didn’t know what to do. But then his mouth was on hers. She almost jerked back, because it wasn’t at all what she’d expected. His lips were relaxed, moving lightly over hers. Not puckering, not pushing. Gentle. She could feel the tickle of his beard. His thumb grazed her cheek, and then she felt his tongue on her lips. That was . . . really nice.

He pulled back, just an inch or two, and looked into her eyes, which were still open. “Hope, you ever been kissed before?” She was too involved in all these new sensations to think to lie about it. She shook her head. He laughed lightly. “Oh, girl. That’s hot. You’re getting all kinds of lessons from me today.” He put his other hand on her neck, pushing those fingers into her hair as well, his thumb on her other cheek. “Close your eyes.”

She did. Again, it didn’t occur to her not to. He whispered, “Just feel. Do what comes naturally.” Then his mouth was back, much harder this time, and his tongue pushed in between her teeth. She felt his tongue against hers, and then she felt a tingling or tightening or something between her legs. It made her moan, and that made him clutch her head even harder. She moved her tongue, feeling his with hers, and he pulled her to standing, one hand releasing her head so that its arm could snake around her waist and pull her tight to his body. She could feel the thick swelling of his erection pressed to her belly, and it made her shy. She canted her hips away from him, but then his hand was on her ass, holding her close.

She put her hands up and grabbed at his kutte, feeling—she didn’t know. Impatient, or something. She wanted to touch him more, suddenly. And he smelled really good. She

slid her hands under his kutte, feeling the hard ridges of muscle on his chest and belly as she pushed her hands around his waist. He released her lips but didn't let her go, holding her tight and looking into her eyes. "Fuck, Hope. You're a natural, girl. We better stop here, or I'm gonna need more from you than a kiss."

Hope was confused. She felt like her brain had lost track of her body, but as Abel smiled at her, his mouth only an inch or two from hers, her brain caught up. She pushed out of his embrace. "One kiss. That was the deal."

He pulled a little at the hem of her t-shirt. "And a nice kiss it was. I think that's what we'll do for all the lessons—I teach you to ride, you let me teach you how to kiss."

She was embarrassed now and starting to feel really pissed off. Crossing her arms over her chest, she said, "I thought you said I was a natural."

Abel's prepay rang just then. As he dug it out of his pocket, her smirked, "Always room for improvement." Then he answered the call. "Yeah . . . What? . . . Jesus. Oh, shit. . . Okay; I'm coming in . . . be about 45, though . . . okay, 30." He ended the call.

He took his helmet off his handlebars and handed it to Hope. He looked worried. "Girl, we gotta get you back right now. Let's go. And hold on. We gotta move."

Hope was born and raised in SAMCRO. She knew not to ask any questions. She put the helmet on and mounted Abel's bike behind him.

## CHAPTER 2—Happy:

*“You, Happy, are a unique cat, I must say.”*

*Don't go, baby.*

*Don't go.*

*Cuz you know I just wanna hold you*

*Wanna keep you from the cold.*

*The nights are long and lonely*

*The road is bitter and dark*

*But here in my arms, baby*

*It's warm against my heart.*

*So let me love you, baby.*

*Let me show you what I mean.*

*Let me bring you sunshine, baby*

*Let me wake your dreams.*

*Don't go, baby*

*Don't go.*

*Cuz you know I just wanna love you, baby*

*Wanna keep you for my own.*

*“Fuck me, Hap. Oh, Lord, it's so good! Oh, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!”*

Hap woke with a start, groaning, sweating, his cock hard and in his hand. He oriented himself, realized he'd been dreaming, he was *not* inside his wife, his wife was dead, and he was alone. He dropped his hand. His cock throbbed, but he wanted none of that empty release.

He was lying on the couch, where he had finally passed out. He struggled up, went to force his hard and willful cock to take a piss, and then rooted up the bottle of Jack he'd been working on last night.

Fuck, he dreamed her every night. Her songs were a constant soundtrack to dreams that were so good, so beautiful, and so impossible they were worse than nightmares. He couldn't get drunk enough to make them go away. But he wasn't sure he wanted to make them go away. At least he saw her then. At least then he could almost feel her again. No matter how intense the pain was when he woke alone.

His chest ached like it was full of shards of broken glass. And the rage. He had no target for it but himself, which was his intention, but it consumed him, constantly, gnawing away at what was left of him, his only relief coming when he passed out. It was getting harder and harder to pass out, though.

When Hap rode away from his wife's wake, he had no plan. No idea. No thought but to get away before his rage tore his daughter apart. He'd stopped at his cabin and dug up the cash he'd stowed there. And then he'd just ridden until he found a place to disappear.

-oOo-

Hap heard the bike coming down the road and knew it was Tig. He'd recognize the distinct sound of any brother's bike, but Tig was also the only one who knew where he was. Didn't expect him to show up in Montana, though, especially not unannounced. Twelve hour ride, at least.

He walked out of the trailer and stood in the grass in front of it. There was almost nothing but grass and sky all the way to the horizon on all sides. Hap had landed here not because he had any real affinity for the area, but because it was far away from any charter, and from most people, and it seemed like a good place for a biker to get lost. Most people might stay on the move if they wanted to disappear. A biker needed to find a place to sit still; he drew more attention when he was moving. By accident, Hap had run across this shitty 1970s single-wide for rent outside a small town in the middle of the grassy plains of central Montana. Hiding in plain sight, parked under the only tree for miles. He didn't do winter, so he wouldn't stay past fall, but for now it had been a place to settle. A place to drink and think. Which was all he did.

He hadn't really been hiding, though. Tig, his oldest friend, had always known where he was. He needed to keep a connection with Hope, make sure she was okay, and Tig had kept his secret. But now he was here. Hadn't even called first.

Tig dismounted and walked up to him. They embraced. Then Tig stepped back and said, "You gotta come back, brother. You gotta do it now. Juice is dead."

Hap took a shocked step backwards. Frank. Oh Christ, Frank. And Hope was with her. "Fuck. What happened?"

"Dropped his bike on I-5 coming back from LA. Lane splitting, when some fuckhead in a big cage changed lanes into him. Freddy was riding with him, got caught up in it, too. He's laid up bad. You gotta come back now. Your girls need you. Your club needs its VP."

"Not VP anymore."

"Yeah, you are. Jax's holding your seat. You need to come home."

What could he do? What help would he be? Since he'd buried Vivian, he could scarcely put together a complete thought without serious effort. He stayed drunk to keep the rage down, but it was getting harder and harder to stay drunk. "I can't, brother. I'm poison."

Without warning, Tig grabbed him by his flannel shirt and hauled him up against the side of the trailer, getting right in Hap's face. "You fucking bastard. You fucking quit wallowing in this pussy self-pity and get your ass home. I let you do this for three fucking months, but no more. I will beat you unconscious and drag you back if I have to, but this ends now. You have a daughter. She's alive. She loves you. She misses you. She needs you. And where the fuck are you? Soaking in whiskey and crying yourself to fucking sleep. Your daughter is fucking alive and she wants you, you piece of shit." Still clutching his flannel, Tig yanked Hap away from the wall and threw him to the ground.

Hap sat there. Tig stood over him, panting, his fists clenched. For a long time, trying to force his head to think through everything that Tig had said, Hap just sat there.

Finally, he nodded.

-oOo-

They waited until the next morning to leave; Tig needed a night's rest off the bike, and Hap needed to sober up. They weren't young guns anymore. Tig was pushing 70. Hap wasn't far behind. Day-long rides took their toll.

Hap's dreams sleeping sober were even more vivid and painful, true nightmares, without even the ephemeral joy of his drunken sleep. He woke up in dawn light shouting, the image lased into his head of Vivian's empty body decaying under his feet. He sat up and dropped his head into his hands, fighting the urge to get a bottle. He had to stay sober. He couldn't ride fucked up.

But the rage was heavy on him.

### CHAPTER 3—Hope:

Hope put a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, some baby carrots, and a glass of milk out for Leo. Nora was still sleeping, so she didn't need to worry about lunch for her yet, which was good because she was really picky, and Hope worried all the time that she wasn't feeding her the right way. Frank could get her to eat stuff like vegetables, but Hope couldn't. All Nora would eat for Hope right now was Cheerios and bananas. She couldn't ask Frank, though. Frank was broken.

Hope was really scared. She was sad.

She wanted her Daddy.

-oOo-

Five days ago, when Abel had brought her back to Frank and Juice's after her lesson—or *lessons*, she guessed—the garage door was open and Frank's SUV was in there; they were back from the zoo. As Abel pulled up and she dismounted, Frank came out through the back door, her arms crossed, eyeing them both suspiciously.

Frank was one of Hope's favorite people, as was Juice, her old man. For as long as she could remember, they'd been the ones to take care of her most often when her parents went out, or on the rare times they went away for the weekend. They were the ones who introduced Hope to video games. They had cool taste in music. Frank had lots of piercings, and she'd once had even more. She was an artist, which was pretty much the coolest thing Hope could think of. And she owned a video game and comics shop, where she'd given Hope a job. They were old—not as old as her dad, but past 40—but Hope still thought of them as her older siblings. Aside from Chibs' old lady, Laura, whom Hope didn't know very well, Frank and Juice were the only ones she didn't call *Aunt* or *Uncle*. Plus, their kids called her dad Grandpa, or some version of it, anyway, so it was like they were siblings.

Abel's phone rang again as Hope and Frank walked toward each other. Hope was much more focused on Frank than on the call Abel was now getting.

As she approached, Frank said, "Hey, kiddo. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. There's some kind of club stuff going on, though. Abel's hyper about it. Was the zoo fun?" There was always some kind of club stuff going on; it took more than a couple of phone calls to cause much worry. Worth noting, though.

She waved the question away. "There were animals. I was surprised you were gone when we got back. Where'd you go with Abel?"

Hope thought about lying, but that wasn't something she did, not without a very good reason. Plus, she knew Frank would be cool. She'd have an opinion, she'd be worried,

but she'd be cool. That's who she was. "He took me out to teach me to ride. He's gonna teach me."

"*Ride* ride?" Frank's pierced eyebrow went up. Hope nodded, and Frank shook her head. "Your father is going to have an aneurysm over that. Abel *and* the riding."

Hope shrugged. "He's not here." She wanted him here, she wanted him to be safe so he could come back someday, but he wasn't here now. He didn't get a say.

"Fair enough. None of your uncles is going to be good with it, either, you know."

Hope grinned at that and nodded toward Abel. "Seems like that's more his problem than mine."

Frank chortled and held up her fist for a bump, which Hope gave her. "That's my girl."

Abel walked up to them, his face pale and serious. Hope remembered the call he got when they were out, and now she was badly scared. She thought about her father. "Hi, Frank. Um, I'm supposed to wait with you. My dad is on his way."

Not her. Frank. She looked over. Frank had gone completely white. She whispered, "Juice?"

Hope could see that Abel didn't know what to do, how to answer. Finally he just nodded, and Frank sat hard on the ground.

-oOo-

Frank had simply turned off. She didn't cry, she didn't lament, she didn't do anything. She'd just turned off. Like a switch. Abel had helped her up off the ground and they'd taken her inside and sat her on the living room sofa. Within ten minutes, Uncle Jax and Uncle Chibs were there. Uncle Jax knelt on the floor at Frank's feet and told her what happened. She looked right at him and said nothing. She didn't react at all.

Uncle Chibs came up to Hope and put his arms around her. He held her close and kissed the top of her head. "How're *you* doin', lass? Been a season o' trouble, yeah?" Hope nodded. She didn't cry. She didn't feel the urge to cry. She loved Juice, really loved him. She couldn't imagine him being gone. But she thought maybe she'd used up all her tears when her mother died and her father went away.

Everybody was leaving her in one way or another.

Within the hour, the house was swollen with Sons and family members. When Tara got there, she gave Frank some pills and led her to bed. Frank went willingly, still quiet. Grandma Gemma brought a couple of girls over to cook and serve. Hope, feeling odd and buzzy herself, focused on Nora and Leo. Nora was only two, so she didn't understand,

but Leo was seven, and he did. Sort of. Uncle Tig took him outside and talked to him, and when they came back, Leo had clearly been crying. He knew his daddy couldn't come home. But the things he said to Hope later indicated that he didn't have a good grasp on where his daddy had gone. Uncle Tig had told him that he was with his Aunt Viv, and Leo was imagining that they were making a new clubhouse for everybody.

Hope liked that thought. She wished it were true.

Abel stayed near Hope the whole afternoon and evening. He was being really sweet, even helping with the kids, whom he usually ignored. She didn't need his attention, but she didn't mind it, either. Every now and then, he'd put a hand on her arm or her back—not try to do anything else, just touch her like that. She liked it. It comforted her. Made her feel a little less alone.

She noticed that her uncles were noticing, though. She'd caught Uncle Jax watching them several times. Nobody said anything, but it was clear nobody liked it. She wasn't a moron; she knew why. She knew her father would lose his shit, if he were ever around again to lose it. She knew she was what her uncles called *jailbait*. Abel was a lot older than she was.

She also knew he was mostly a self-centered jerk who thought he was a lot more awesome than he really was. But he was being nice to her now in a way she needed. He'd been nice to her all day in that way. Since he let her put her hands around the controls of his own, brand new bike. That was a big deal. Her thinking about Abel was changing a little. He made her feel something new, something good. He made her feel better. She needed to feel better.

He made her feel less alone.

It was well past midnight before everybody finally mounted up and rode off. Aunt Tara, Uncle Jax, and Abel were the last there. Aunt Tara pulled Hope aside and looked her in the eye. “Are you sure you've got this? We can bring Nora and Leo with us. You don't need to take them on, honey.”

But Hope didn't want them to go. They gave her something normal to do, and she really needed that. “I'm good, Aunt Tara. I want to. Promise. But do I need to do anything for Frank?”

Tara shook her head. “She should sleep the night, and I'll be back in the morning. Maybe she'll be a little better then. Just stay close, keep your phone close, and call me anytime for any reason at all. Even if you just need to talk. Okay?”

Hope nodded, and Aunt Tara hugged her tightly. Then Uncle Jax did the same. “You do it, darlin'. You call. That's an order. Got it?”

“I got it, Uncle Jax. I promise.”

He kissed her forehead and turned to Abel. Hope saw the look that passed between them. “Let’s go, son.”

Abel nodded and said, “Right behind you, Pop.” They held eye contact for a few more seconds, and then Abel’s parents left, leaving her, for all intents and purposes, alone with Abel.

When the door closed, Abel put a hand on her hip and looked at her. “You sure you’re okay here by yourself?”

“I’m not by myself. There are three other people in the house.” Frank, Leo, and Nora were all sleeping.

“Yeah, all of them needy. It’s a lot for one little girl.”

She pushed his hand off her. “I’m not a little girl. I take care of Leo and Nora all the time. And your mom is going to be back in the morning to help Frank.” She walked to the door and put her hand on the knob. “Besides, your dad wants you home, so you should go.”

He put his hand around hers on the doorknob. “Do you want me to go?” His thumb brushed over the back of her hand, and she felt that tingling between her legs again.

She didn’t want him to go. She felt sad and afraid of being alone in this house. She knew all she’d do would be sit and think of everybody she missed. God, she missed her mom so fucking much. And her daddy. Why did he leave her? Why wouldn’t he come back? What did she do wrong? Didn’t he love her?

And now Juice was dead, too. And Frank was broken. Everybody was gone. She was alone.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair.

And then she was crying. Fuck! Abel put his arms around her and pressed her head to his shoulder. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on tight, crying into his neck. She felt his hand stroking her hair. He whispered, “Hey. Hey. No, you shouldn’t be alone. I’ll stay. I’ll stay with you.”

“Your dad—” She had trouble getting the words out through her tears.

“—will just have to deal. It’s okay.”

He held her as her sobs wrung out. She hadn’t cried like that since the night of her mother’s funeral, after her father had disappeared and she was alone in Frank and Juice’s guest room. She lifted her head from Abel’s shoulder. She’d totally soaked his kutte and

the neck of his t-shirt. Looking him in the eye, she asked, “Why are you being so nice to me?”

He smiled at her. “I like being nice to you.”

She didn’t know what she thought of that answer, but she figured at least it was honest. And she liked him being nice to her, too. He brought his right hand up and grazed first her left cheek and then her right with the backs of his fingers, wiping her tears away. The way his blue eyes were locked on her made her feel weird. And then she knew he was going to kiss her.

He did. His hand went to her neck and into her hair like before, and he held her head as he came in. This time, knowing better what to expect, when his lips touched hers, Hope leaned into him, bringing her arms up to loop around his neck. She tried something, and pushed her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and jerked back, looking at her with an expression she couldn’t read. “Jesus, Hope.”

She felt embarrassed; she must have done something wrong. Dropping her eyes, she started to slide her arms down and push back from him. But he clutched her close and came in again, whispering against her lips, “No, you’re not going anywhere.”

What she felt then she couldn’t even process. His mouth was hard on hers, his beard rough on her lips, his tongue thrusting into her. It scared her a little, but it made her feel really—*really*—good, too. Her heart was racing. She made a whimpery sound. And then she felt his palm on the bare skin of her belly, his fingers clutching her waist.

His hands were soft—softer than her father’s, anyway. Her father’s palms were thick and calloused and almost didn’t give at all when she held his hand. When she used to hold his hand. When he’d been with her. Her eyes filled with tears again and she broke away from Abel with a sob.

He was panting and tried to grab her back, but she stepped out of his reach. “Hope, what? What? That wasn’t good? I thought that was good.”

Hope wiped the new tears away with a rough swipe. “No—it’s not bad. Just—I’m confused. My head is loud.” She looked down at the floor. “Sorry.”

He took a big breath and let it out. “S’okay. Still not leaving you alone, though. You want to watch some TV?”

It was like there’d been a nice guy update to the Abel program. This couldn’t be the same guy who used to pull those nasty stunts on her and Thomas. It wasn’t even the same guy who’d been hanging around staring at her boobs for the past two years or more. He hadn’t even touched her boobs, except to be pressed up to them. Which had made them tingly. She reminded herself that this had to be a temporary thing, just about Juice’s

death. Abel was not a good guy. He was a self-centered butthead with a mean streak. She needed to remember that.

“Yeah. That’d be good.”

They sat together on the couch and turned on the big set on the wall. Frank and Juice had a rad, state-of-the-art setup, with voice activated controls. Actually, Hope realized that only Frank had that setup now. She sighed back a sob, and Abel looked over at her, concerned. Shaking her head to indicate that she wasn’t losing it again, she settled back next to him. They scrolled through the options until they came upon an old Bruce Lee movie.

After a while, Abel put his arm around her shoulders. She let him, leaning into his chest. She fell asleep there before the movie was over.

-oOo-

Now it was five days later. Abel was still being nice, they’d kissed a few more times and that was nice, everybody was still looking askance at them growing closer, Frank was still a zombie—though one who walked and occasionally talked now—and Juice’s funeral was the next day. Hope had been in charge of Leo and Nora, and to a lesser extent Frank, the whole time. She was feeling overwhelmed and scared, but she was glad for something to do that kept her busy. If not for that, she’d just be sitting next to Frank.

Leo wanted to swim. Nora was still napping. She peeked in on Frank, who was sitting in her room staring at the TV and didn’t even acknowledge her, then she grabbed the baby monitor and went to the pool with Leo. Not in the mood to swim today, she wore a t-shirt and shorts over her two-piece suit. She sat at the table, with the umbrella opened, and doodled while Leo swam.

Then she heard a bike pulling up the long driveway. She recognized the sound. Her heart dropped into her stomach. Or it rose into her throat. She didn’t know where it went, but it wasn’t where it was supposed to be. “Leo. Leo! You gotta get out, buddy. Come on, come on. You gotta get out now.” He climbed out, pouting, and she threw a towel around his shoulders and led him out of the gated pool area. She looked over at the top of the driveway.

Her father was swinging off his bike.

He was back. He was here. He’d come back to her. “Daddy?”

He was walking toward her. He looked terrible. No, he looked beautiful. He was here. “Hey, midget. Love you.”

She went to him. It didn't occur to her to hesitate. She didn't care where he'd been. She didn't care anymore that he'd been gone. He was back. He was here. He'd come back to her.

She wasn't alone.

She kept walking until she hit his chest. When she felt his arms close around her, she collapsed into tears. He kissed her head, his lips lingering in her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he whispered over and over.

## CHAPTER 4—Happy:

He had his girl in his arms. She'd just come right to him, no hesitation, no anger, no recriminations. He'd abandoned her, and still she came to him. She'd simply said, "Daddy," and came into his arms.

He didn't deserve her. He was not fit for her. But he had to find a way. He had to curb the vile rage in his heart and be the father Vivian had believed him to be. He didn't know how, but he had to try.

He held her as tightly as he could without hurting her and whispered over and over, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She shook her head against his chest, her hands knotted in his t-shirt. "I don't care. I don't. Just please stay with me. Please don't leave me alone."

"I won't, midge. Not again. I'm here."

-oOo-

He knocked but didn't get an answer. Hope had told him to just go in, so he did. The room smelled stale. The drapes were drawn, and the bed was a tangle of wrinkled linens. Frank was curled in an upholstered arm chair, a knitted blanket over her legs, staring at the television. He glanced over at the set; there was a show about dogs or something. She didn't seem to be watching. The sound was down so low it might as well have been muted.

She was gaunt and pale, her face expressionless, her red-gold hair dirty and lank. She hadn't even acknowledged that he'd come in. He squatted in front of her chair, his hand on her leg. "Hey, little girl."

Her eyes slid from the television to his face. She simply looked at him for long seconds. It reminded him so much of the way Vivian was after the concrete room, after Katherine died, that he thought his heart was going to implode. He actually put his hand to his chest.

"You're back." Her voice was flat, but at least she'd said something. Hope told him that Tara had prescribed her some kind of pills. He wondered how much of her flatness was the medicine. He hoped most of it was.

"I am. Heard my girls were having some trouble."

"Trouble. Yeah." Her eyes slid back to the television.

"Need you to come out and help us, little girl. Hope tells me Nora won't eat anything but Cheerios for anybody but you. Been almost a week of nothing but Cheerios. Kid's diapers are gettin' funky."

Her eyes came back to him, looking sharper now. But she said, “I can’t, Happy. I can’t do it.”

He put his hand on her cheek. “I know. I can’t, either. I need you, little girl. I don’t know how to do it on my own. I’m just a mean, angry old man. We’re gonna have to help each other.”

She stared at him. He held her eyes. He wasn’t shining her on. He couldn’t come back on his own. He needed someone to call him on his shit, and the only person who’d ever really been able to do it and get him to listen, besides Vivian, was this sad, scrawny little thing getting swallowed up in a big, weird, lime green armchair.

Frank could help him, that he knew. But there was also a small voice in him, a voice he didn’t want to acknowledge, that understood that Juice’s death was helping him. Frank’s pain gave him something to focus on, a thing he could do. He didn’t fear fucking her up the way he feared he would Hope. She was a woman grown, with a family. He needed only to support her, not raise her. He could push his rage aside and help Frank, and maybe that would give him a way to be a good father to Hope.

He stood and held his hand out to her. Her eyes shifted from his face to that hand. For more long seconds, she stared at it. He waited. Finally, she took his hand and let him pull her up. Jesus, he’d forgotten how little she weighed. Like picking up a bag of chips. He’d pulled more than he needed to, and ended up yanking her against him. She immediately held on to him, her arms hooking around his waist. He held her, his hands around her head, his lips in her hair.

“We’ll get through together, little girl. Keep each other going. We’ll do it together.”

-oOo-

Frank came out that night and ate the casserole that Hope had made. She got Nora, who sat in her lap the whole evening, to eat some of the casserole and a small serving of broccoli. The five of them sat together like a weird, sad family. Hap’s broken heart fractured more when he sat down. Hope had made one of her mother’s recipes.

The night was cool, and throughout the house, even in Frank’s room, they’d opened the windows to get some fresh air in, clear out the staleness of the sorrow a little. Frank went back to her room as soon as she’d put the kids to bed. Hap let her go. He understood that she needed to do this slowly. So did he. He helped Hope clean up the kitchen, watching her as they worked. She was so like her mother; she even had the same habit of pulling her hair over her head to one side. It made his chest ache even to look at her.

He was staying here for awhile. He couldn’t face the house, all of Vivian’s things where she’d left them. He couldn’t do that yet. Here, he could be a help. Hope brought out some bedding so he could sleep on the couch.

It was past nine, and they'd just settled down on the couch together to watch some television. Hope had never had much patience for television or movies, hating to sit idly for long, but she seemed to like the stillness now. He took her hand. He couldn't believe that she'd just forgiven him, as if he'd only been out to run an errand. He'd left her for fourteen weeks, and she didn't care. That was her mother. Vivian hadn't held grudges, either. She'd believed that anger took too much of a toll on the angry person. Hap held a grudge until it was settled or until somebody died. Even the grudges he held against himself. Especially those.

A bike was coming up the drive. Hap didn't recognize it, but Hope clearly did. She leapt off the couch and went out the back door. Curious, he followed.

What he saw set off the red rage so fast it made him dizzy. Abel. Fucking Abel Teller. Wearing a goddamn patch. With his hands on his daughter's hips, like they were comfortable there. And Hope's hands on that shithead's arms. What the holy fuck. He stalked toward them, his hands rolling into fists.

Hope saw him coming and stood in his way. "Daddy, stop. No way." He faltered a little. She looked determined, and he remembered how she'd come right to him, without blame. He started to back off. But then Abel stepped around her, between Hap and his daughter, as if he were protecting her from *her own father*. Hap dropped him with a punch to the gut and another to the chin.

"Daddy! Fuck! Go back inside! Please!" She reached down to help Abel up. The asshole brushed her off and stood on his own. But he didn't come at Hap.

"I'm glad you're back, Happy. Hope's missed you. So has the club. I mean no disrespect to her, brother. I swear."

*Brother.* That arrogant asshole just called him brother. Because he was wearing a patch. Christ, what kind of a world did he come back to?

He spat in the space between his feet and Abel's. "Go back inside, Hope."

"Daddy—"

"Now."

She looked at Abel, who nodded. *She checked with Abel first.* Hap's whole body felt like it was filled with acid. He needed to kill.

Abel got back on his bike and rode down the drive and back to Charming. Hap and Hope watched him go. Then Hope turned to him. She didn't look angry. He knew he did. But she just looked sad.

“You were gone, Daddy. I was on my own. Things changed. You don’t get a say now, not unless I ask for one. You went away. You don’t get a say.”

Now the acid was at his heart, but he still said, “You’re 16, Hope. I get a say.”

“I’m 17, Daddy. You missed my birthday.”

She walked past him and into the house.

He stood there, awash in raw fury and self-loathing. He dropped to a squat, his arms around his head. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t. This was too much. He would ruin everything, everything he and Vivian had made together. His rage was going to tear it all down.

No. He had to try. He had to try. Running was for pussies. Stand up. Face up. Stick it out.

He went back in. Hope was nowhere to be seen. He went down the hall to the room that had become hers while he was away and knocked on the door. “Hope.”

It opened right away. “Go to sleep, Daddy. I’ll see you in the morning.” She started to close the door on him, but then it swung wide and she came out and kissed his scarred cheek. “I love you, Daddy. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

Her mother’s girl. Something had happened to Hope while he was away. There was no temper, no anger. Hope had always resembled her father in temperament as much as she resembled her mother in appearance. Now she was less like him and more like Vivian, as if some part of her mother had stayed behind in her. “I’m not going anywhere, midge. Love you. Sorry I missed your birthday.”

“It’s okay. Night, Daddy.” She closed the door.

Hap went out to the living room and sat on the sofa. Now that he was alone, the rage he always felt, but which had spiked considerably in confrontation with Abel, ran rampant through his head and heart. He was shaking with it. An impotent rage. The rage of a man who let a doctor kill his wife with poison. Who left his daughter to fall into the clutches of a shit like Abel Teller. Who could not keep hold of anything good, not for long. Not nearly long enough.

He hadn’t had a drink since Tig showed up at that shitty trailer. He had intended to stay sober at least through Juice’s funeral. But he could not. He had to kill, or he had to drink himself unconscious. He went to the bar in the dining room and found a bottle of Jack.

-oOo-

Hap sat at Juice's graveside and stared down the row at his wife's marker. For as long as he was at the cemetery, he felt its pull, but he couldn't bring himself to go to her grave. Where she was rotting under his feet.

Frank sat between Hap and Hope during the funeral, and they ran interference for her at the wake. She hated all of it, Hap knew. He understood. She'd buried both her parents when she was only 16, and she hated having to stand and accept condolences from people who had no idea what to say or what she was feeling. So they didn't make her do it. They got her out of there as quickly as they could. Leo and Nora went home with their Uncle Jax and Aunt Tara.

Thomas had come up from LA for the funeral, but he was only staying one night. Hap was glad to see how happy Hope was to have Thomas there. They'd hugged long and hard when he got there, and Hope had spent every moment she wasn't with Frank with Thomas.

Hap was also glad to see that Abel clearly hated it. He caught the asshole glowering at his brother and Hope several times. If there was something for Abel to be jealous about, maybe Hap didn't need to worry so much about Hope ending up with him.

When Hap was ready to take Frank out of the clubhouse, which was long before the crowd of mourners from charters everywhere was ready to wind down, Hope asked if she could go out with Thomas to grab a bite. He was pleased that she asked, and pleased that she was going out with Thomas, so he kissed her cheek and said yes.

She'd never been on a date before, as far as he knew. It didn't occur to him to tell her when to be back.

He saw something strange as he was guiding Frank out to the lot. Hope and Abel, tucked back in a corner, talking intently. Hap saw his daughter kiss Abel's cheek and walk away. Abel watched her go, looking unhappy. He looked over and met Hap's eyes. Hap didn't look away until Abel did.

-oOo-

When he got Frank back to her house, he led her inside and to her bedroom. The pajamas she'd been wearing that morning were still on the bed. "You got this?" he asked.

"Yeah. I can dress myself. Good night, Happy." Her voice was so flat it was almost without breath.

"You need anything? Anything?" She shook her head. He put his hand on her back, rubbing gently in a circle. "We're gonna be okay, little girl. Help each other, right?" She turned her head and looked at him. Her normally crystal-bright, pale blue eyes were dull and flat. She didn't respond.

Hap kissed her temple and left her to her grief.

This night he didn't even try to resist. He went for a new bottle of Jack and sat alone in the dark living room. He relaxed the rigid hold he kept against it all day and let the rage fill him up. Then he drank.

-oOo-

*Don't go, baby.*

*Don't go.*

*Cuz you know I just wanna hold you*

*Wanna keep you from the cold.*

*The nights are long and lonely*

*The road is bitter and dark*

*But here in my arms, baby*

*It's warm against my heart.*

*So let me love you, baby.*

*Let me show you what I mean.*

*Let me bring you sunshine, baby*

*Let me wake your dreams.*

*Don't go, baby*

*Don't go.*

*Cuz you know I just wanna love you, baby*

*Wanna keep you for my own.*

*Fill me up, Hap. Fill me full. Oh, Lord, you fill me up.*

Hap woke with a start, groaning, sweating, his cock hard and in his hand. Fuck, he hated waking up to have that dream blast apart. He sat up and tried to get his bearings. He was still drunk. Very drunk. Not drunk enough to stay unconscious, though. Where was he? Frank's. Frank's house. Not Frank and Juice's, because Juice was dead. Buried him today—or maybe by now it was yesterday. He rubbed his face and sat back.

Frank was standing in the middle of the living room, watching him. She was wearing a little sleeveless top and a pair of boxers that were much too big for her, probably Juice's.

“Little girl?”

She was holding a knife, and her arm was bleeding.

He leapt up, ignoring the crazy way the room tilted. “Shit! What did you do?”

“I can’t feel it. I can’t feel anything.” He grabbed the knife from her with one hand and grabbed her bleeding arm with the other. His first thought was that she’d slit her wrists, but she hadn’t. Not exactly. Instead, she’d drawn four long cuts across the top of her forearm, just below her elbow. They weren’t too deep. Bloody, but not deep.

The kind of cuts he’d make when he wanted the pain to really last.

She was still standing there, looking down at her arm. He picked her up, willing his legs to stand steady, and carried her to the bathroom, stopping to throw the knife in the kitchen sink on the way. Fuck, he was too drunk to think. He forced himself. He sat her on the closed lid of the toilet and rummaged around until he found what he needed. He got her cleaned up and used antibiotic cream and gauze to bandage her up. She didn’t resist; she didn’t help. She just sat there.

As he leaned over her, the silver chain he now wore around his neck swung forward. Frank reached out with her unhurt arm and grabbed what hung from it: Vivian’s wedding ring. He pulled it from her hand and put it back under his beater. That was private.

“You miss her,” she said, low and flat.

Hap looked into her eyes. “Yeah.”

“It hurts you everywhere.”

The truth of the words sliced right through him, and he took a shaky breath. “Little girl, you need to shut up.”

“You’re hard.”

He didn’t understand what she meant, but he saw she was looking at his crotch. His cock was still hard from his dream, and tenting his boxers. He hadn’t noticed.

“I’m drunk and was dreaming. Takes a while to go down. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“Means you can feel.” She reached into his boxers and grabbed him. His cock, which had begun to soften slightly, filled right back out at the contact. He hadn’t even jacked off since Vivian died. He hissed and jerked away.

“What are you doin’, Frank?”

“Don’t call me that. You never call me that.” He looked at her. Her eyes were bright, intense. There were fine lines in the corners—laugh lines. He’d never noticed them before. He saw something in her eyes, but his head was too cloudy and thick to read it.

He finished taping the gauze around her arm. His face was close to hers. “Little girl. What are you doin’?” He spoke quietly, as she had.

“Help me, Happy. You said you’d help me. You said we’d help each other. I can’t feel anything. I’m dead. I’m already dead.” She reached out and brushed the scar on his cheek with her fingertips. That was something Vivian had done often. He groaned and grabbed Frank’s hand, holding it away from his face.

He didn’t know why he did it. He was sad and lonely. He loved her and felt close to her, two grieving souls. She was asking for his help. His cock was now painfully hard. He was drunk and short on self-control. It was all of that and none of it. Maybe he just needed to feel something besides pain. He didn’t know. He couldn’t think enough to know. But for whatever reason, he leaned in and kissed Frank on the mouth. She opened to him immediately and looped her arms around his neck. His whole body caught fire. Before he knew what he was doing, he was kissing the shit out of her, groaning, his tongue deep in her mouth. He stood up straight and brought her with him, barely noticing her weight hanging from his neck. He grabbed her ass, though, and hitched her up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He felt her slight weight on his cock, and he had to lean against the bathroom wall for a moment to regain some composure. Some sliver of composure. He didn’t have much.

Still kissing her deeply, he carried her to her bedroom. He meant to put her to bed. He did. He meant to end this at a kiss and go back to the living room to drink his way back to oblivion. But when he leaned over to lay her down, she wouldn’t let go. She was wound tightly around him, and she wouldn’t release him. He’d have had to hurt her to get loose.

“Please, Happy, don’t leave me alone.”

Any other request, and he might have figured out a way to extricate himself and go back to the living room. But she didn’t make any other request. “Little girl, what’re we doin’?” As he asked, he kneeled over her on the bed and pushed his hands under her little shirt, caressing the bare skin of her back. He could feel every vertebra, every rib. There was nothing to her.

“I don’t know.” He didn’t know, either, but he didn’t want to stop. He wanted to want to stop, but something inside him was desperate for this contact. She looped one arm more tightly around his neck and reached into his boxers again with her other hand. This time, though he hissed in a breath, he didn’t stop her. Instead, he pushed her shirt up and put his hand on her small breast. Her nipples were pierced; this one had a ring in it. He ran his thumb over the ring, and she arched up with a little cry.

He wedged her hold loose enough that he could shift her up, and he replaced his hand with his mouth, sucking gently on the ring. Then, finally, she relaxed her hold on him. As she writhed under him, her legs came loose from his waist, her arm from his neck. He could get up now without hurting her. He could end this. He should end it. What was happening here was nothing but regret.

Instead, he pushed his hand into the boxers she was wearing and down between her legs. She was shaved. And wet. He slid one finger into her, and her hips came up off the bed. He slid another finger in and pumped; she pushed down on his hand, bringing his fingers deeper. Her hand was still around his cock, sliding gently up and down. The contact was too light to get him off and too much to ignore. She was moaning and whimpering at his every touch, and he was getting woozy from his own erratic breathing.

He yanked her boxers off and moved over her. He hesitated, his arms shaking as he held his weight from her. She was so little. Everything about her was small. He was not. “Little girl . . .”

She grabbed his cock again. “Please. Please. Make me feel. I can’t feel anything. I can’t even cry for him. Please.”

He grabbed her ass in one hand and lifted her up as he pushed into her with a tortured groan. Her legs went around his waist again and her arms snaked around his back. He leaned down and kissed her, his tongue seeking to tangle with hers. And he began to move. As soon as he did, he knew he wasn’t going to last long. He hadn’t been with a woman other than his wife in eighteen years. He hadn’t gotten off at all in months. Frank felt completely different from anything he even remembered. He felt the pressure at the base of his cock building almost immediately.

Instinct had simply taken over. He put his hand between them and rubbed his thumb over her clit. He thrust steadily, deeply, his thumb working her, until she arched backwards and drove her hips frantically against his.

He couldn’t hold off for her to finish and came, the force of it agonizing, while she was still climbing. Then he lifted her up and drove hard into her until she opened her eyes as if she were startled. Her hands on his shoulders, her nails digging into his back, she bent backwards and held, her body rigid with her release. She said nothing; she barely made a sound.

When she relaxed again, Hap gently laid her back on the bed. He eased out of her, afraid he might have hurt her. She was too quiet. He lay next to her, his head propped on his hand. “Little girl?” He put his free hand on her chest.

She was crying. Just tears at first, and then hitching sobs. She curled into him, and he held her while she finally cried for the man she loved. As he held her, thinking of his loss as well as hers, it dawned on him that she and Juice had been together longer than he and Vivian had. He kissed her head and held on until she cried herself to sleep. Then he closed his eyes and slept, too.

-oOo-

He woke dreaming of Vivian. When he realized where he was and remembered what he’d done, he fairly leapt out of Frank’s bed. The room spun wildly. He felt sick, and not

only because he was hung over. The guilt he'd been living with since Vivian died, boring a hole in his belly all the time, doubled in size.

The dark was still heavy on the night; he looked at the clock at her bedside: 2:42. He pulled the covers over Frank's shoulders as she slept. Then, still dressed in wife beater and boxers, he left her room as quietly as he could on his shaky legs.

He didn't realize that the light that was coming from the living room was new. He didn't remember that when he'd carried a bleeding Frank out of it, the room had been dark but for the moonlight. Thus, he was not prepared to see Hope sitting on the couch.

The regret he felt before he met her dark eyes paled against the regret he felt at the betrayal he saw there. "Midget, I—." He stopped. There was no way to finish that sentence.

She stood and walked past him without a word.

## CHAPTER 5: Frank

Every morning for the past week, like most mornings for the past twenty years, Frank's first sense upon waking was coziness. For the half second, or few seconds, it took her to come fully into consciousness, she felt comfortable in her bed, in her life, in her skin.

Every morning for the past week, Frank's second sense, when consciousness rose to awareness, was emptiness. She could almost hear the *click* as her brain, seeing the dire storms on the horizon, shuttered its windows and retreated into the dark space of memory. She had twenty years of memories with Juice. There, he was still with her. There, with him, she was still complete.

Without Juice, she was a vacuum.

There was a little section that stayed open enough that she was aware of her surroundings, recognizing when people were talking to her. Not open enough to care, but to know it was going on. That section also held her awareness that Leo and Nora needed her. They'd lost their father. But the rest of her brain retreated from the guilt that knowledge brought with it.

Sometimes, closed up alone in the room she and Juice had shared since before they were married, Frank heard the busy sounds of her children having their days. She knew that Nora was too young perhaps even to have fully realized that her daddy wasn't around. In that small space of awareness, she found room to wonder what Leo had been told. He was a quiet, serious boy. She wondered whether he understood. The thought would occasionally come forward that she should be out there, helping him, but there was no room for a thought so big, and it would get pulled back into the darkness.

Her brain had never worked entirely right. It had been a long time since she'd lost so much control of it, though. And it had never misfired the way it was now. Before, it was feeling *too much* that sent her over. Her brain and blood buzzed with too much of everything. This time it was the opposite. She felt nothing. She wasn't buzzy; she was numb.

She hadn't cried. Not a single tear. Her man was dead. She would never see him again. She wanted to cry. She wanted to mourn. She wanted the pain. But every time she went looking for it, the dark space in her head got a little bigger.

She hadn't seen his body. She remembered Jax telling her that he'd identified him and that she should not see him. He'd handed her Juice's rings, including his wedding band. She hadn't argued. She hadn't responded at all, except to hold out her hand and take the rings. They were all of them dented.

She didn't know what was in the box they'd buried. She only knew her man had not come home, and his rings were in a blown-glass bowl on her dresser. His wedding band. Proof enough that he was gone.

Maybe the numb, black space taking over her head meant that she was gone, too.

She barely remembered being in the clubhouse after. All she really remembered was staring at the mural she and Happy had painted together more than ten years ago. She wanted that to hurt, seeing their image of the Sons as family, when their own families had been so torn apart in the past few months. Her abstraction and his realism had merged together beautifully, once they'd fallen on the concept. Once they'd known what they wanted to do, they'd been perfectly in sync.

Happy saved her from the gauntlet of mourners, scooting her out of the clubhouse and to her SUV. He drove her home and led her to her room, where he left her to change and go to bed.

She didn't know how long she stood at the side of her bed. When her knees buckled and she almost fell, she came back to awareness enough to change out of her black dress—she didn't remember putting it on—and pull her pajamas back on. Just a camisole and a pair of Juice's boxers, as she'd worn for years. She even managed to brush her teeth. Then she sat in the middle of her bed and tried to feel. She didn't care if it made her kill herself. She wanted to feel. She wanted to feel the loss of the man she'd loved almost half her life. His memory was evanescent already from her mind, dissipating under the weight of her numbness. She was going to lose him unless she could feel the loss of him. She knew it.

She didn't know how she ended up standing in the living room, but she was. Happy was looking at her, saying "Little girl?" as if to ask why she was there. She didn't know. Then he jumped up and grabbed her, asking her what she'd done. She didn't know. She looked down at the arm he was holding. It was bleeding. Huh. Didn't even feel like her arm. She couldn't feel anything. Then he was carrying her to the bathroom.

He wore Viv's wedding ring on a chain around his neck. That was the first clear new thought, the first vivid new image she'd had in days, that ring swinging as he leaned over her, the diamonds catching fire in the harsh bathroom light. Viv's wedding ring. Not on her finger anymore, because she was dead. Like Juice's band, in the glass bowl now.

She reached out and put her hand around the ring. His whole body tensed, and he took it back from her. Pain. His pain. It was all around her. That's what she needed. What Happy was feeling. It was so intense and heavy she could almost taste it, smell it, touch it. It made her wet.

It made him hard. She reached out again, into his boxers, and put her hand around him. He was huge and hot, and she felt him grow even bigger inside the loop of her fingers. Then he jerked away from her. But that was what she needed. She knew it.

-oOo-

The next morning, her first sense upon waking was not coziness. It was soreness. In her body and in her heart. Before she was even awake she could feel the heavy ache between her legs and in her chest. And then she felt sadness. A sea of it, salty and deep. Before she'd yet opened eyes still swollen and irritated from hours earlier, she curled into a tight knot and cried, her face buried in Juice's pillow.

When her tears finally subsided, she rolled to her back and opened her eyes. The black space in her mind was a bit smaller, perhaps. Perhaps it was receding. She reached out to find Juice, and he was there, the loss of him. She had him. An anguish in her heart that told her she would not lose him. Holding tight to that ache, she turned outward, forcing open the shutters in her head.

She heard the sounds of her children and Hope, starting the day. She should not have leaned so hard on Hope, only 17 and plunged into her own grief and pain. But she was a good girl. She took good care.

Frank folded back the covers and winced at a sharp pain in her arm. It was bandaged. A new kind of knowledge about the night before came on her, a clarity. Jesus. She'd let Happy fuck her. No, she'd *asked* Happy to fuck her. No—she'd *begged* Happy to fuck her. And he had.

Happy. Had fucked her.

She let the memory of it have its way, expecting regret to overwhelm her. It didn't. Shock, yes. Confusion, yes. But not regret. She had the pain she needed. Somehow she thought Happy had released that pain to her. He'd given her her loss. And now she could grieve.

## CHAPTER 6: Hope

The ride back from dinner with Thomas was tense. They were in his little white coupe; Thomas had never gotten into bikes, had never wanted to learn to ride, or work on them, or any of it. He didn't even drive a stick shift. He was club only because of Uncle Jax and Abel. Everybody thought he'd come home when he finished law school and work with the club—even Thomas thought that, so it might well be true—but Hope knew that Thomas would never wear a kutte.

That had never bothered her. She didn't totally get it, because she loved the club. She loved everything about it—except for how her dad went away for all those years, and how people she loved got hurt and even killed. But she felt comfortable only with her family. The rest of the world made no sense to her at all. Except for Thomas. Thomas had always made sense to her. And she to him. He wasn't really club, but he understood it. He understood her.

Abel had been super annoying at Juice's wake, acting like he had a problem with her spending time with Thomas. When he knew full well how close she and his brother had always been. She didn't get it at all. When she and Thomas were getting ready to leave, Abel had yanked her aside and told her he wanted her to stay there with him. She didn't get it. She'd told him as much, told him he was being a jerk and she was going where she wanted to. He'd looked at her weird, so she told him she'd see him tomorrow.

Then at dinner, over burgers and soda at the Applebee's in Lodi, things got weird with Thomas, too. They got bad, really. They'd started pleasantly enough, even though it wasn't quite normal. Thomas had told her all about college and working at the law firm, and it had all been fine. Hope thought he was kinda turning into a dork, but she still loved him and was glad just to be with him. He'd been her only real friend basically her whole life. He'd defended her against Abel, to his own detriment, when she'd been too small to stick up for herself, and they were stalwart support for each other against him always.

Things started to go sideways when she told him she wasn't going back to high school. Thomas was appalled, and they'd squabbled about it until Hope told him it wasn't his fucking choice. Thomas had never had real trouble at school. He'd enjoyed school and had lots of friends. He'd played baseball and had been on student council. He was always mellow and kind. He went with the flow. Hope had never even found the flow.

Then they'd started talking about Juice and Freddy, who was in a coma and had only even odds of survival, and Thomas had really pissed her off. Like made her feel crazy pissed off. He'd gone off on a rant—or maybe it was a lecture; college was really starting to go to his head—about the idiocy of lane splitting and how what happened was really Juice's fault. Hope, feeling the buzzy haze of rage she'd lived with throughout her years in school, made a scene, and they were thrown out of the restaurant. Standing in the parking lot, Thomas decided to tell her she was being immature.

She didn't punch him. She wanted to—her fists curled tight with the desire to put her fist in his stomach—but she didn't. She just stood at the passenger door and waited for him to unlock his little pussy car.

The ride back to Frank and . . . to Frank's house was quiet and tense. When she got out, he said, "See ya," and drove off. She probably wouldn't see him again until Christmas, so that was a cold goodbye, but she was too pissed herself to be sad about it.

She checked her phone before she went inside—about half past midnight. Her dad hadn't told her when to be home, but knowing him, there was probably a hidden safe zone. She figured she was in it. The house was dark, though, so she went in quietly.

She didn't go into the living room. If her dad wasn't asleep, then he was sitting in the dark, and that meant he wasn't in shape for company. She went down the hall to her bedroom. She was glad it would go back to being the guest room soon, when she and her dad went home together. That was scary, going back home, but at least he'd be with her.

As she turned the corner to go to her room, she heard something coming from Frank's. She sounded upset. Hope went to the door and raised her hand to knock.

She heard her father's voice. *Little girl . . .*

She heard Frank's voice. *Please. Please.* She heard Frank murmuring but couldn't make out the rest.

She couldn't make sense of it at first. She heard her father groan. And then she heard him make sounds that caused her stomach to twist in her gut. They were quiet, but she knew those sounds for what they were. Her parents had been loud. She put her hand to her mouth and backed away.

She went to her room and paced around in there, not sure what to think or do or feel. No—wrong. She knew what to feel. Horror. Disgust. Fury. Her mom—God, her mom. How could he do something like this to her mom? He was supposed to love her! Hope had made it okay in her head that he'd left, because he loved her mom so much and was so sad. How could he forget her already?!

And Frank, Frank was broken. She was, like, literally crazy right now. She hadn't even been able to pick a dress to wear this morning. Hope didn't have any experience with sex, but she was pretty sure crazy people shouldn't be having it, especially not on the day they bury their husband. Her dad was like practically raping Frank.

Hope went back out and almost got to Frank's door, intending to put an end to what was going on, when she stopped, feeling nauseated. She couldn't. She couldn't see her father like that. It was too much. He should have stayed away if this is what he came back for.

Then the thought occurred to her. He'd come back when *Frank* needed him. He'd come back for Frank. He hadn't come back for her at all.

She tried to go back to her room, but she was too agitated; she felt like she was trapped in the small space. Finally, she went to the living room and waited. She didn't know if he'd come out until morning, but she wanted to be here if he did. She wanted to fight with him. She wanted to yell at him. She wanted to hurt him.

But when he did come out after a couple of hours, she couldn't. She couldn't say anything at all. He saw her, and he looked guilty. He tried to say something and then stopped.

She just walked away.

-oOo-

She didn't sleep at all. She simply stayed closed in her room until she heard Leo, a naturally early riser, up and about. Then she got some fresh clothes on and went out to start the day.

Her father was passed out on the couch in the living room. There was a mostly empty bottle of Jack Daniels on the floor. She wanted to ignore him, but he was on his back, in his underwear, with the blanket kicked away, and the way he was lying there—*gross!* She didn't want Leo to see. So she went in and tossed the blanket over him, averting her own eyes as much as she could, too. She picked up the bottle and put it on the bar.

God, her heart hurt so bad. She hadn't thought it could have hurt worse than it did when he was gone, but it did. She almost wished he hadn't come back.

There was a bloody knife in the sink. Hope's brain couldn't make sense of that at all. She peeked in on Frank, who was obviously sleeping. She went back and rinsed the knife and put it in the dishwasher, setting aside any more thoughts about it.

She had Nora up and dressed and made sure Leo did the same for himself, and then she got them to the table. She was just putting Nora's big plastic bib on to try to get her to eat something when her dad walked into the kitchen. At least he was wearing jeans now.

"Midget, we need to talk."

"Don't want to. I made oatmeal. It's on the stove."

Nora banged her spoon on the high chair tray and yelled, 'GRAMPY GRAMPY GRAMPY!' Hope watched as her dad winced, but then smiled and went over to smooth Nora's soft brown hair with his hand.

*Yeah, Daddy. What you did is triple extra disgusting.*

“Hey, missy. Havin’ oatmeal?”

“NO! NANAS!” Nora shouted. Everything she did was at maximum power. Hope decided not to even fight with her about oatmeal. She couldn’t face that on top of everything else. She sliced a banana into little chunks and put them in a bowl. She poured a bunch of dry Cheerios on Nora’s tray and set the bowl in the middle.

Leo, on the other hand, was a great eater and was already looking for a second bowl of oatmeal, with strawberries. Hope served it up. Her dad walked up next to her, an empty bowl in his hand. She ignored him and turned back to hand Leo his refilled bowl. Her dad put his hand on her arm. “We need to talk, Hope. I need to explain.” Hope stared at him. She was devastated and furious, but she was also confused. She loved him so much. She didn’t know what to do.

Leo looked over at them. “Grandpa Hap, are you having oatmeal, too? I’ll save you strawberries.”

Without breaking eye contact with Hope, her dad said to Leo, “Sounds great, bud. Thanks.” Hope broke the stare. She gave Leo his oatmeal. Her dad spooned some up for himself, and they sat at the table awkwardly, leaving the introverted Leo to carry the whole conversation. So there was silence.

-oOo-

It was nearly 10am, and Frank hadn’t been out of her room yet. Nothing unusual about that. Not these days.

Aunt Tara came to check on Frank and pick up Nora and Leo, one for preschool, and the other for day camp. When Aunt Tara came out of Frank’s room, Hope could tell that she’d picked up on something off in the house, but she didn’t make a fuss about it. She did ask Hope if she was really doing okay. Hope said she was, and Tara took the kids and left.

As soon as Tara and the kids were down the driveway, Hope went into the living room, where her father was folding up the bedding on the couch.

“You can’t be here, Daddy. You need to go. Now.”

He turned to her. She could see that she’d hurt him, but she didn’t care all that much. “Midget, I told you I’m not going. I’m not leaving you again. You and me, we need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to talk about what you did. I don’t want to think about it. I want you to stay away from here.”

“Hope—”

“Daddy, *PLEASE!* PLEASE GO!” She was going to cry. She didn’t want to cry; if she did, he’d try to hug her, and she’d let him. She wanted her Daddy. Her head felt too small for all these thoughts.

For a minute, he stared at her. Then he shook his head and grabbed his pack from the corner of the room. “Okay, midge. Okay. I’m sorry. Tell Frank—” He didn’t finish. When he passed her, he reached his hand out; she flinched away. She let him walk out.

She stood there for maybe thirty seconds, and then she went tearing after him, hearing his bike roar to life. She didn’t see him when she went outside, but she ran to the driveway anyway. He was about halfway to the road. But he must have seen her, because he stopped and turned around. When he got back to her, he cut the engine.

“Yeah, midget?”

She put her hand on his handlebars. “Just—let me know where you’ll be, okay?”

He covered her hand with his. “I’m just going back to the house, midge. I told you I’m not leaving you again, and I meant it. I’m just goin’ home. When you want me, I’m with you.”

-oOo-

She was so confused. She went back into the house after her father left and just stood in the kitchen, confused. Frank came into the room behind her. Hope turned and looked her over. She looked a little more normal, Hope thought. Not normal, not like Frank, but not like a zombie, either. Mussed and really sad, but alert. Her eyes were swollen, as if she’d been crying—that was new. Hope didn’t know if it was bad or good, but it was something different.

Her arm was bandaged. Hope thought about the bloody knife and tried to make those two things into some kind of equation. They had to be related, but she didn’t understand. Had her father stabbed Frank? That made less sense than anything else in this completely sense-free day.

She figured Frank probably didn’t know she knew, and she didn’t want to make her feel worse. So she tried to be normal. She pretended to ignore the bandage.

“Hey, Frank. I made oatmeal.”

Frank made a little face. “No thanks, kiddo. I don’t like oatmeal. Just coffee.” She went to pour herself a cup. “Where’s your dad?”

Hope couldn't tell what Frank was thinking or feeling. She tried, but she didn't see anything but that weary sadness. "He left." The carafe rattled sharply as Frank put it back in the coffeemaker.

"Left? Where? Did he say why?"

Hope didn't want to answer that last question. "He said he was going back to the house."

Her answer seemed to give Frank some relief. Hope tried to understand what that meant. Then Frank asked, "You didn't go with him?"

Wanting out of this conversation very, very badly, Hope simply shook her head. She needed to change the subject, immediately. "You need me to do anything particular today?"

Frank smiled a little. "You're a good girl. I don't know what I'd do without you. I'm okay today, I think. Okay enough. Was thinking I'd call in at the shop, see how things have been cooking without us."

"Oh, I've got that. Jerry brought stuff by yesterday morning. With everything going on, I just put it on your desk, but it's records of all the stuff he's done. Scheduling, deposits, receiving, bills, everything. He explained what he had, but a lot of it was more than I know about. He said everything is running along, though. He sent you a hug, but I know better than to give it to you." Frank had a very short list of people she could tolerate being hugged by. Hope was on that list, but she didn't much like hugs, either, so they had a pact.

Frank's eyebrows were up—the most interest she'd yet shown. "Sounds like Jerry might need a raise. Okay, well, I'm still going to hide today, then. Don't mind me." She took her coffee cup back to her room.

She did seem a little better. Hope was very confused. She didn't want to think that what her dad had done made Frank better. She didn't want to think what that could mean. She wanted to get out of this house, go somewhere. But they were out in the middle of nowhere, and she didn't know how to drive. She was trapped. She needed to learn how to drive.

She got her phone and dialed Abel.

"Hey, girl. How you doin'?"

"M'okay. I want Lesson Two."

There was a pause. "I don't know, Hope. Your dad'll kick my ass."

That was true, but she didn't really care. "Pussy."

This pause was longer. When he spoke, his voice was different. “You watch your mouth, girl. It’ll get you in trouble.”

He could be such a butthead. “Are you going to teach me or not?”

“Oh, you could definitely use a lesson. Fine. When?”

“Today. Now. And my dad’s not here, so you’re safe.”

“I’m workin’, Hope.” Like all the Sons, he did hours in the garage. She huffed impatiently.

“Whatever. Never mind.” She took the phone from her ear, prepared to end the call. Maybe she’d just start walking somewhere. She felt like maybe she was going crazy, too.

But she heard him say, “Hold up, hold up.” She put the phone back to her ear.

“What?”

Hope heard him sigh dramatically. “Lemme finish this oil change. I’ll be there in 60. If you don’t mind me a little dirty.” He laughed.

She didn’t get the joke. “That’s fine. See you then.”

She ended the call and made herself stop thinking. No more thinking. Everything was too intense and confusing. It all hurt. She was tired of hurting all the time. It wore her out.

-oOo-

He was there in 45 minutes; she heard his bike on the road. She’d showered and changed, and had checked on Frank, who was sleeping again. So she left a note on the fridge that she was out and had her phone. She was on her way to the driveway before he could get his helmet off.

He refastened it and tossed her another. “Here. Don’t seem to have yours anymore.”

She caught his spare helmet and strapped it on. “Guess it’s at the house.” Last time she saw her own helmet, her dad had it in one of his saddlebags. She didn’t know where it was now. Maybe still there.

She started to swing on behind him, but he caught her arm. “Hold up, girl.” He tapped his lips with a gloved finger. Rolling her eyes, she leaned in and kissed him. She actually really liked kissing him. He was good at it. She didn’t have anything to compare him with, but it seemed like he was good at it. He pulled a little on her arm, and she stepped

closer. As soon as she did, his hand moved to her ass and he pulled her close, sliding his tongue between her lips.

When he pulled back, he was grinning. “Mmm. Nice. Okay, hop on. Let’s get you ridin’.”

## CHAPTER 7: Happy

Hap sat astride his bike, parked in his driveway. He'd been sitting there for 20 minutes, at least. He couldn't move. He knew what waited for him in that house. Vivian. She was in there. But she was not, not really. Never would be again. What was in that house was loss, with tangible mass and weight.

Thoughts of what had happened with Frank, and after, pummeled him. He was disgusted with himself. He'd betrayed Vivian, Hope, *and* Frank. He'd been weak. Didn't fucking matter that he'd been drunk. Didn't matter what Frank had said she needed. She was like a daughter to him, and he'd fucked her.

And now Hope had sent him away.

He was tearing everything down, just like he knew he would.

He dismounted and plodded to the front door, his keys in his hand. The front yard was neatly mowed; the club had been taking care of things for him. He slid his house key into the lock and stopped. He wasn't ready. He pulled the key out and sat down on one of the chairs near the door, his head in his hands, still holding his keys. His eyes closed, he let thoughts and memories of Vivian flood him.

He knew where he had to start. He stood and walked to the back of the house, fingering his keys as he went, taking hold of a different one.

He let himself into her music room.

Before he even crossed the threshold, the pain almost bowled him over. He could smell her. The room was stale and still, having been closed up for months, yet under that aroma of disuse, or maybe over it, was Vivian. He stopped, one foot through the doorway, his hand still on the knob, and closed his eyes, swallowing back the lump in his throat. Then he stepped all the way in.

She hadn't been back here much at the end. Everything was neat but for a thin layer of dust. There was a stack of papers, sheets of music, on the top of her piano, the baby grand that had been her grandfather's. Her laptop was closed on her desk. Her guitars were in their racks, either hanging on the wall or standing on the floor. Her Martin was in its stand, on the floor next to the sofa.

Her Martin. Her favorite. It had been his first gift to her, their first Christmas. He remembered the day clearly, every detail bright. Taking her to the guitar shop in Berkeley, the rich smell of wood and lacquer. Telling her she could pick the one she wanted, that he would buy it for her. Convincing her to let him do it, her teasing him about being tight with a buck. Watching her for hours as she carefully selected the right one. The sun through the window making a halo around her hair. Listening to her play and sing. Her rich, sultry alto.

Knowing that he would love her until he died.

He sat down on the sofa and picked up the Martin, brushing dust off. At first, he laid it across his lap, running his hands over the neck and body, trying to feel Vivian's hands on it. He plucked softly at the strings; each tone seemed to him resonant with his grief. He pulled the instrument that in so many ways was her, was *them*, into his arms and laid his forehead heavily on it.

-oOo-

Thus submerged utterly in his loss, Hap was eventually able to go into their home. He closed the Martin in its case and brought it with him. He had no intention of giving up anything that had been Vivian's, but the Martin he would keep especially close.

The house was as neat as the music room had been, nothing but dust out of place. The refrigerator was empty; otherwise, things looked like they always had. After having lived together for so long, almost everything they owned they'd bought together. Some pieces of her jewelry, a few of her instruments, were older than them. But he couldn't think of any of his own possessions that predated her.

His kutte. Only his kutte.

He turned down the hallway to the bedrooms and his den. The walls there were full, almost floor to ceiling on both sides, with family photos. He remembered when Vivian had done this—had started it, anyway. She'd been pregnant with Hope; she'd wanted their daughter to know her family, almost all of whom were dead before she'd been conceived. He inched down the hall, looking at every one. Now, Hope's children would know their grandmother only through photographs like these. They'd have to be told what a beautiful woman, in every way, she'd been.

He opened the door to Hope's room. It was all but empty. He stood in her doorway for several minutes, feeling a loss here, too. This had been her room since they'd brought her home from the hospital. It had been redecorated a time or two, but she had never lived anywhere else. But she did not live here now. She might not come back, not after the night before. Not knowing what she knew, what he'd done. He'd probably driven her away.

Across the hall, the door was closed to the bedroom he'd shared with Vivian for almost nineteen years. His hand shook when he turned the doorknob. The last time he'd been in this room, he'd dressed to attend her funeral.

This room was neat, too. Someone—Frank, he supposed—had made the bed. He leaned the Martin in its case against the wall and lay down, pulling one of Vivian's pillows out from under the bedspread and pressing it to his face. Her scent was still in it. He rolled to

his side. He hadn't cried since the day of her death. Now, steeped in her scent and her memory, he did. He cried until he fell asleep.

-oOo-

Hap woke from a dream of her, this one not sexual. In the image from which he woke, she'd been laughing, her head tossed back, her black opal pendant nestled between her beautiful breasts, catching fire in the sunlight. She'd worn the pendant, and the ring that matched it, almost every day when they were first together. She'd stopped after Hope was born, finding jewelry impractical for the life of a mom. After that, she'd worn them for special occasions—on the few nice dates they'd ever been on, or when she was performing, or at family events with the Sons.

He woke knowing that Hope should have that jewelry. Even if she never spoke to him again, even if she never entered this home again, she should at least have the black opal pendant and ring, which were among her mother's most treasured possessions, having come to her from her own beloved grandmother. He got up from the bed and went to Vivian's tall dresser, the top drawers of which housed her jewelry.

He knew what he was looking for—a velvet box. It wasn't readily to hand. He had a moment's panic, thinking someone had taken them or they'd been lost, as he rifled through both drawers. He found it tucked in the back of the second drawer. When he pulled it out, something caught. He pulled again, a bit harder. There were two envelopes bound to it with one of Vivian's thick hair elastics. He pulled the black band off, sliding it over his hand to his wrist.

In Vivian's neat, rounded hand, one envelope was addressed to him, the other to Hope.

Immediately, he understood what he held. *Christ*. He staggered backward and sat hard on the edge of the bed. He set the letters, and the velvet box, aside at first, buffeted by chaotic emotions. He was terrified to read them, afraid the pain would be too much, but he wanted desperately to have her talk to him again, even this way. Some new connection. Some new thing she would say to him.

He picked up the envelope addressed to him: *Hap*. There was a smiley face next to his name. He huffed a sad laugh. Smart-ass woman. He opened the seal.

His heart skidded before he'd even unfolded the several sheets of paper. She'd scented these sheets the way she'd scented her letters to prison, and the smell of her released powerfully when he pulled the paper free. He set the folded letter aside for a moment and put his nose inside the envelope. He breathed deeply. Lavender and honey. His wife. She knew the potent association that scent had for him. She'd always known. With his free hand, he clutched her ring through his shirt.

He unfolded the letter and read:

*My love,*

*I know this is fucking sappy, but I guess I feel fucking sappy these days. I'm lying in bed, alone in the house, thinking about you and Hope, and how much all this sucks. I know I'm dying. I can feel it happen. You won't let me talk about it, but I know it's true. And I'm worried about you, Hap. I know you. I know how you think. You're a stubborn son of a bitch. I love that about you. It makes me crazy, but I love it. If you weren't, we probably wouldn't be together.*

*Remember when you came up to me on Telegraph? Lord, I was so freaked out. I was sure you were a psychopath who would kill me in my sleep. I'm still not sure how you managed to talk me into dating you that day. You barely talked at all. It's like you willed me to give you a chance.*

*Didn't hurt that you were hot as fuck, of course. Still are. You are a beautiful hunk of man flesh. Gets me tingly thinking about you right now.*

*But I digress.*

*If you find this after I'm gone (and it'll be really embarrassing if you find it before then—also, in that case, stop snooping in my dresser, you ass), then I know what's going through your head. The same thing that's been going through your head since you buckled Hope into her car seat at the curb outside St. Thomas. Hell, you've been saying it since then. You're thinking you can't be a good father to Hope. You're thinking you're going to screw her up somehow. You're thinking that you were only good with me.*

*For a smart man, you can be really stupid. I've been trying to get you to see what a good father you are for 16 years. I've been trying to get you to see that you're a good man for a lot longer than that.*

*Do you think I'm an idiot? Would I have bound myself for life to the stalking psychopath I thought you were that day on Telegraph? Let me just clear up any confusion: NO. I WOULD NOT.*

*Here's who you are to me. Here's who I love:*

*You love hard. I'm not talking about the way you fuck (although, yeah, all these years of you and your big cock rocking my world, that's been pretty damn great). I'm talking about the way you love. You hold it close, but when you give it, you give it completely.*

*You are a loyal motherfucker. That ink around your neck? You really mean it. I believed it when I first saw it, that night in Carson City. I could see it in your eyes. I think it was the sexiest thing about you. That's really saying something, by the way. There are a lot of sexy things about you.*

*You take care of the people you love. You think you're not compassionate. You think you're cold-hearted. Hap, you are so fucking wrong. You don't pay much attention to people outside your family, that's true. But you will do anything for your family. And you make yourself nearly crazy sometimes trying to keep us safe and happy. I can't imagine feeling more cared for than you make me feel.*

*You are a good man, my love. The violence in your life doesn't change that in the least. In fact, I think it makes it even more impressive. You love and care despite the violence. Because you are a good man.*

*You're a good father. You have always been a good father, from the first day. From even before she was born. The relationship you have with Hope—you think I helped you get that. I didn't. I just stayed out of your way. You get her in a way that I can't. She and I have our own bond, but it's different from the one she has with you. She is your girl. You didn't see her waiting for you when you were inside. You don't see the way she looks at you sometimes. That girl adores you. You're her hero. I think it's because the two of you are so much alike. You have a shorthand. You understand what she's going through at school, what it's like not to fit. You know what she needs. I could list dozens of times when what I wanted to do was the wrong thing and what you wanted to do was the right. I'm not going to make that list, because it would depress me. I'll just remind you how pissed I was that you let her run away from school.*

*You knew what she needed. I did not.*

*So let me get to the point of this dumb letter. I know what you're thinking. Don't do it. Don't run, Hap. Don't shut down. (Remember when you had to tell me that? You were right then. I'm right now.)*

*The goodness in you has always been there. It's part of who you are. You can be a good father to Hope the way you always have been, because that's all you. I didn't make you good. You say that all the time, but it really isn't true. You love that girl. She loves you. Help her. Let helping her help you. We made her together. If you leave her, you leave me, too. Do you see that?*

*I'm not going to end this with some sappy line giving you permission to move on with your life. But I will say that I want you to be happy, whatever that looks like for you in the future. I love our life, Hap. I hate to leave it. We made a good family. We made a good girl. We did good. You made me happy. Even through our dark times, I never doubted that you loved me. You gave me that. And I think I gave it back to you. I hope I did.*

*You know I never thought much about God or what happens next, but I do now. Inevitable, I guess. I've never really thought there was anything next, and I still don't. But it's nice to think that I might have a chance to hold Katherine, and that she and I will be waiting together for you and Hope to join us—a long, long time from now. That would be cool.*

*I guess that's the sappy line I'm ending with.*

*I love you, Happy Lowman. Be strong for our girl.*

*V.*

Added to the bottom of the letter, in a different ink, was a postscript.

*PS: I just reopened this to let you know that today I felt stronger and didn't look like I already died a couple weeks back, so I made two videos. Yeah, I know, the sap factor is getting high. Indulge a dying woman, okay? They're on my laptop, as is all of my music. My password is happy+viv=hope (hey—don't make fun). Juice can help you if you can't figure out how to get on the computer. Luddite. Hope could help, too, but I'd like you to look before she does.*

Hap read it through three times. His girl. So much sass. She'd made him laugh; even as grief flayed him all over again, she'd made him laugh. Christ. He didn't want to have a life without her in it. Fuck it, he didn't. The future unspooled in front of him dead and blank.

*If you leave her, you leave me, too. Do you see that?*

No, he hadn't seen that. He'd seen his rage and grief. He'd seen the cold, dead space taking over his heart. He'd seen the man who'd once badly hurt a small boy, and, by extension, caused the death of his own child and grievous harm to his wife. He'd seen a man who could only do damage to his daughter, who would pull her down into the abyss of his fury.

He'd thought he wanted to save Hope by leaving her. But maybe that was a convenient excuse. What he wanted was to disappear into his pain. And he had. He'd wanted the pain to kill him, but it hadn't.

*If you leave her, you leave me, too. Do you see that?*

She'd known. She'd always seen him more clearly than anyone, even himself. If he wanted to keep Vivian as close to him as he could, he had to keep her family intact. He couldn't let her down. He couldn't let his daughter down. He had to be the father he was when her mother was with them.

He'd already come to that realization; he'd understood it when Hope came into his arms and welcomed him home. He just didn't know if he could do it. He remembered who he was without Vivian. He didn't want that again. He wanted the life they'd had. He wanted to wake up in the night and feel her hair under his cheek. He wanted to put his hand on her belly and pull her close to him. He wanted to hear her laugh.

Her computer. She'd made videos. And there were dozens of videos there from Hope's childhood. Vivian had held the camera, but he'd be able to hear her voice, at least. He went back out to the music room and opened the small, slim machine. Nothing happened. He looked for an on switch and didn't find one. She'd anticipated this, smart-ass woman, but she hadn't anticipated the Juice would be dead, too.

Pepboy was pretty good with this stuff. Hap closed her laptop and took it with him back to the house. There, he collected the black opal jewelry and Vivian's letter to Hope. He packed it all in a saddlebag and headed off. He had a couple of stops to make.

-oOo-

His first stop was Frank's house. Even if Hope didn't want him there, he wanted her to have these things right away. And he needed to talk to Frank. He needed to make sure she was okay, that he hadn't made what she was going through monumentally worse. He needed to apologize—if she would talk to him.

When he got to her back door, he almost knocked. He'd never knocked in all the years they'd lived out here, but after last night, he wasn't sure he should just walk in. Ultimately, though, he did.

The house was quiet. He called out, "Hello? Anybody around?" He got no answer but the quiet. He couldn't think where Frank or Hope would be. Even the kids should be back from camp or school or whatever by now, unless Tara had kept them with her. He went deeper into the house, on alert for trouble.

Frank met him in the hallway, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt so big on her it had to be Juice's. She looked exhausted. Her eyes were swollen, her face blotchy. But she smiled when she saw him. She seemed better. And she didn't seem to be upset with him. That did his heart some small bit of good.

"Hey, little girl. You okay?" He almost reached out to her—he would normally have reached out to her—but he felt awkward and ashamed. He put his hands in his pockets instead.

She noticed, but didn't remark on it. "No, but I'm not in imminent danger, I don't think. You okay?"

"Not in the least. No." He looked down into her eyes. Damn, she looked sad. He knew. He felt it, too. "I'm so sorry, little girl. What I did . . ."

"Happy." She took his wrist, pulling his hand out of his pocket. "Let's talk." She led him to the living room.

As they sat next to each other on the couch, he asked, "Where's Hope?"

“Out. She didn’t say where. I came out awhile ago, and there was a note on the fridge.”

“She with Abel, you think?” The thought of it made his heart race. But where else would she be? She had no friends.

“Maybe. But one problem at a time, dude. You don’t need to apologize for last night. It helped me. I can be sad now.” Her eyes filled as she said it. “I need to be sad. I need to hurt for him.”

Shaking his head, he looked at the floor. He didn’t understand that. His sadness was ripping him to shreds. It was unbearable, but he’d learned he had no choice but to bear it. It taxed him like no torture ever could. He picked up her bandaged arm. “How’s this doing?”

“It’s fine. You took care of me.” Frank took his hand in her tiny one. “It’s okay if you don’t understand why I need to feel pain. Just believe me. I’m not sorry about what happened. I don’t want it to change anything between us. Can you be okay with that?”

He could. The thought of losing Frank on top of everything else made him sick, especially now, when she was the only one who could really understand. “Yeah, okay. But Hope knows. Don’t know how to fix that.”

“What do you mean? About last night? How can she know?”

“Came from your room, she was waiting for me in the living room. Wouldn’t talk to me then or since. I left today because she wanted me to. Won’t talk about it.”

She paled and let go of his hand. “Oh, fuck. Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“She didn’t say anything to me this morning.” She picked at the bandage, and Hap pulled her hand away and held it.

“She blames me. She should. I should’ve stopped it.”

“Happy, don’t. Please.” Frank was quiet, thinking. “I’ll talk to her. Would that be okay?”

Normally, he wouldn’t want an intermediary standing between him and his girl, but now he knew he needed one. “Yeah. Thanks. Would you give her these, too?” He reached into the interior pocket of his kutte and brought out the velvet box and Vivian’s letter to Hope. Frank took them, noticing the writing on the envelope.

“Fuck. Happy, is this—?”

“Yeah. Found it in her dresser. There was one for me, too.” His voice broke on the last syllable, and he cleared his throat. “Fuck, little girl. I miss her so goddamn much. Don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I’m fucking everything up. Everything she made. I’m tearing it all apart.”

“Only if you don’t try to fix it. Hope loves you. Jesus, she loves you. Juice and I laugh—” She gasped and closed her eyes. He knew; the shift to past tense made a slicing pain. “—used to laugh about the groupie eyes she makes when you’re not looking. She’s wanted to be you her whole life. She’ll forgive you. I know it. You can fix it. I’ll help if I can.”

“She’s more than me. Better.”

“Well, yeah. She’s half Viv. That’s an upgrade, it’s true.” She bumped her shoulder into his arm. “But you’re pretty fucking awesome, Happy. You are.”

They heard a car pulling up the driveway and both looked up to catch it passing the windows: Tara, back with the kids. Hap nodded toward the drive. “You need help with them?”

“You know what? No. I’m going to be mom tonight, see if I can’t manage it. Probably better if you weren’t here alone with me and the urchins when Hope gets back, you know? Until I can talk to her?”

Hap sighed. “Yeah, okay. Fuck, she better not be with Abel.”

“Don’t light a fire there, Happy. It won’t help you get straight with Hope. That’s what’s important, right?”

Keeping Hope safe was important. Keeping her happy. Abel was bad news for her, he knew it. But he also knew he had to earn his way back with his daughter. That was more important than anything else. He had to protect her from the sidelines for awhile until he could fix what he’d broken. If he could fix it at all. “Yeah. You do look a lot better, little girl.”

Her smile was sad, maybe a little ironic. “Pain is better than numbness. It centers me. Always has. I’m so lonely for him I’m dizzy. There’s like an overinflated balloon filling my chest. I don’t even know how to think of what my life is going to be without him. But I have to have one. I was thinking about it this morning. Nora and Leo guarantee that I have to keep going. They tether me. The way that Hope tethers you. Maybe we just don’t think about our lives now. Maybe we just think about theirs.”

He kissed her forehead. “We still gonna get through this together?”

“Fuck, I hope so.”

Hap left then, saying hello to Tara and giving some attention to Nora and Leo on the way. He headed back into Charming. He had a few things to take care of at the clubhouse.

## CHAPTER 8: Abel

Abel put his phone back in his pocket and finished changing the oil on the Honda sedan. Once he'd parked it back in the lot, he went into the garage and pulled Kevin aside. They'd been Prospects together, but now Abel had his patch. Kev was still a grunt.

"Dude, take that Chevy for me."

Kevin turned from restocking belts on the wall. "What? Dude, that's a tranny job, ain't it?"

"Not a pull. Probably a solenoid or somethin'. No sweat. But I gotta go." Abel knew it was a bigger job than Kevin was used to, but he didn't care much. He could do it or find someone who could.

Kevin did care. "Abel, man—."

"Do it, Kev. I'll catch ya later." Abel walked out, leaving Kevin gaping at him.

As he strode to his bike, he kept a lookout for his dad, or any of the older Sons, all of whom seem to have decided to form a wall between him and Hope. As much as they were trying to thwart him, they weren't getting in Happy's way at all. His own dad had told him just last night that he wouldn't get between him and Hap where Hope was concerned. Typical. Abel wondered if that extended to Hap wanting to kill him, because he was pretty sure Hope's dad wanted him dead.

There was not one single smart reason for him to keep after Hope. She was young, she knew nothing, and her father would very likely kill him if he ever got as far with her as he wanted to get. She was blazing hot, but there were hot girls everywhere. He'd popped his cherry when he was 15—not a Crow Eater, either, but a little princess at school with a taste for bad boys—and he'd barely had a day since that he didn't dip his dick when he wanted to. He bought condoms in bulk at fucking Costco, for chrissakes.

But he'd been thinking about Hope since she was in middle school. He knew that was fucked up, but she did *not* look her age. She got tits and hips early, and they were great. She was fucking gorgeous. Thick, black hair halfway down her back that always looked like she'd just come back from a fast ride; dark, wide eyes; skin that naturally looked lightly tanned. And that tall, sleek body. Long neck, long legs, tits and ass that just didn't quit. Distracting at 14, goddamn bewitching at 17. The first time he'd seen her in a bikini, at Frank and Juice's, he'd about creamed his board shorts.

He'd kept his distance, more or less, because her father, frankly, scared the fuck out of him. Happy's reputation was decades long and known throughout the whole MC, not just Redwood. Abel had thought it was mostly talk, because in the years he'd been officially attached to the club he hadn't seen anything extreme. Just a typical badass, past his prime. But he'd been wrong. He'd challenged Hap once, too damn drunk to think twice,

and that old fucker had beaten him half to death. Then he'd spent more than a year carrying his fucking train, and Hap had seen to it that he'd been humiliated. Getting on the wrong side of Happy Lowman was bad fucking business. Abel wasn't an idiot. He knew when he'd been licked.

But then Hope's mom died, and Happy split and was gone a long time. Looked like he wasn't coming back. Abel took the opportunity to get close to Hope. He'd just wanted to taste that pure cherry. He'd gotten a kick out of the thought of taking what Happy had tried to keep from him.

She'd surprised him by asking him to teach her to ride. He'd surprised himself by agreeing—and letting her learn on his fucking brand new bike. She'd charmed him, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. Then he'd kissed her, and she'd so obviously had no idea what she was doing it floored him. He was her first kiss. By the time he was 17, he'd done just about everything it was possible to do to a woman. She had done nothing. *Nothing*.

That was *seriously* hot. He couldn't stop thinking about it. She was uncharted territory. Every time he did something for the first time, it would be the first time that thing had ever been done to her. He'd jacked off to the memory of that kiss more than once in the week or so since it happened.

But that very same day, Juice was killed. Everything tipped sideways and slid. He felt the loss acutely—Juice was his favorite of the older generation of Sons. He didn't treat Abel as if he were some stupid, arrogant kid. He was cool.

As Abel watched Hope deal with Juice's death, and Frank and the kids, something had happened to the way he looked at her. He'd known her her whole life. Until she became something he liked to look at, she'd been nothing but an annoying little shit who pitched big, amusing fits when she got riled. But watching her pick up Frank's slack, he felt sorry for her, found himself trying to help her. And not just to get into her pants. He'd offered his shoulder, and she'd taken it. He discovered that he liked that.

She was still jailbait and, since Happy had turned up, a death warrant, but he liked hanging around with her. He enjoyed her company, even when she was sad. He couldn't think of *any* other female for whom that was or had ever been true. Not his mom—they fought or were silent as much as anything. Not his grandmother, who treated him like he was still ten years old. Not Chibs' girl, Eileen, who'd never been around the Sons much and was way too sweet and skittish when she was. And certainly not the brainless bimbos around the clubhouse, spreading their legs for any dick sticking out under a kutte. He'd never spent time with a girl and enjoyed talking to her. When he'd felt Hope starting to warm up to him, trust him a little, he'd been glad of it. It had been a week, and he hadn't even tried to do more than kiss her. She was getting pretty damn good at that, too.

She was going to get him killed. Best case, she was going to get him beaten bloody. He should stay the fuck away. But he was riding to pick her up, to give her another riding lesson. Yet another thing that would make her father lose his shit.

Maybe he was an idiot, after all.

-oOo-

Hope was picking it up quickly. She'd remembered everything from the first lesson. Considering the events that had happened in the intervening week or so, that was really impressive, but he had witnessed her quickness of mind more than once since he'd known her.

Today he let her get a little distance and work on turns, and she looped the cul du sac over and over. She wobbled the bike a few times, enough to make him nervous, but she didn't lay it down. He was going to have to do it himself intentionally, if she didn't do it herself accidentally, because if she was going to ride for real she needed to be able to put it back up. But the thought of his new bike taking that hit made him queasy.

It seemed like she was getting good enough to try a longer ride—not going far at all, not getting too much speed, but doing more than turning in circles. She needed a bike of her own. One that she could drop and pick up. Something smaller than his beautiful new bike.

No way she was getting a bike of her own, though. Far as he knew, she didn't have her own money, and Hap would never go for it. He had a thought. He kept it to himself, because he wanted to make sure he thought it all the way through first. It would sure as fuck catch Happy's attention if he did it. Everyone else's too. He needed to let that thought simmer for a while.

The sun was hot, and he'd taken his helmet off and put it on the ground while she rode, combing his hair back with his fingers to refasten his ponytail. He let her take a couple more turns around the circle. She showed no signs of wanting to stop, and he was starting to worry a little that she was going to bleed the tank dry. He walked into the street and stood in her path. She pulled up smoothly at his feet.

He straddled the front tire and put his hands on the handlebars. "Okay, that's the end of Lesson Two. Off you go."

She grinned. She had a great smile, when she used it. Her lips were naturally ruddy. In fact, Abel tried to think if he'd ever seen her with makeup. She didn't need it. Her lashes were dark, her eyes wide, her lips red, her skin smooth and kissable.

She killed the engine, kicked the stand down, and dismounted. "That was cool. Thanks. When can I get on the road?"

“I don’t know, Hope. We’re gonna have to talk about your dad pretty soon. He’s gonna be pissed.”

She stepped right up to him, her eyes hot. “Fuck him. Or are you still too chickenshit to stand up to him?”

Fuck, she had a mouth on her. Half the time it excited him, the other half it pissed him off. This time it pissed him off. “I told to watch yourself. Bitches don’t talk to Sons like that.”

She punched him in the ear. Pain exploded, and his ear rang loudly. He put his hand to the side of his head. “What the fuck?”

“Told you what I’d do if you called me that.”

“You fuckin’—” He reached for her and caught her arm, but she spun and broke his grip. She came up a couple of steps back, her hands up, in fists.

She looked intent. “You think my dad didn’t teach me how to fight?”

She came in with a spin kick. He was impressed, actually, but he’d seen her go into it, so he was ready, and caught her ankle. He held it, and she bounced on one leg to keep her balance. He grinned at her. This was kinda hot. He gave her leg a swift yank, putting her on the ground. He kept hold of her ankle, keeping her from landing with all her weight, and she was still wearing a helmet, so he knew she wasn’t hurt—winded, but not hurt. While she was lying there trying to get her breath, he thought about dropping on top of her and kissing her, but decided against it.

Instead, he stood over her. “You think my dad, *and* your dad, and all the rest of them, didn’t teach me? I been fighting for years. Didn’t your dad teach you to watch what you leave sticking out?” He held his hand out to her, locking his legs in case she tried to pull him over—which was smart, because that’s exactly what she tried to do. Instead of her pulling him down, though, he yanked her up.

She brushed herself off. “Yeah, he told me. I just forgot.”

“You mean you were just showin’ off. Spin kick. For real?” He crossed his arms and looked her over. “You ever fought anybody who really wanted to hurt you?”

“Butthead. Yes, I have.”

What a kid. He laughed, “The little pussies at school don’t count. And you need to learn to cuss better. I know you know better words than that.”

She looked at him, her hands on her hips. “Cocksucker.”

That was definitely a better one. Dangerous, in fact. He stepped up and stood right against her. “Careful, girl. That one could get you in trouble.”

“Whatever.”

“You know, you’re pretty tough, but you should be careful.” She was panting, and her color was high on her cheeks. His cock had been paying particular attention since he’d put her on the ground. Now it was uncomfortable. There was dried grass tangled in her hair; he plucked it out with a gloved hand. “You piss off the wrong person with that ‘tude of yours, you could get hurt. For real, Hope. You’re just a girl.”

“Fuck you!” She went to hit him in the chest, but he grabbed her arm just before she made contact.

“What’s got you so riled up? You been sweet all week. I do somethin’?”

She yanked her arm out of his grip and walked around him. “Nothing. Never mind. If we’re done, then just take me back.” She stalked to his bike and stood waiting.

He grabbed his helmet off the ground and joined her at his bike. He swung his leg over, but he paused before he put his helmet on. He didn’t like how this trip was ending. She was stirred up about something. He turned; she was waiting, hands on her hips, for him to get the bike going. He set his helmet over a mirror. “Hey. C’mere.”

“What?” But she took a step closer.

“You pissed at me?” He didn’t want her to be. He cared. He didn’t know what he’d do if she was pissed, but he cared.

She huffed a sharp sigh. “No. This has been rad. It’s just—stuff. Everything. Everything sucks.”

“Yeah, I know.” He pulled her closer. “Your dad’s back, though. That’s good, right? For you?” Not for him, that was sure.

“Whatever.”

Oh, that was interesting. Abel had noticed that things between Hope and her dad were good as soon as he’d come back. He’d been pissed about it, actually; he’d been hoping for some tension between them, which could make room for him. Something must have happened last night, because they’d seemed all good yesterday. Just like she’d seemed all good with Thomas—until Thomas came storming home around 1am. Maybe Hope had had a rough night with guys she liked better than him. That didn’t suck, far as Abel was concerned.

*How to play this, how to play this. . .*

“It’s gonna be okay, Hope. All this fucked up shit, the way you feel? It’ll pass, and it’ll be okay again.” He brought her against him and kissed her, unfastening the helmet she was wearing as he did so.

She pushed away a little. “What are you doing?”

He took the helmet off and set it on the handlebars with his. Then he took off his gloves. “Not ready to go yet. That okay?”

She looked at him skeptically, but then she nodded and put her hand on his shoulder. She leaned in and kissed him. He put his hands on her hips and lifted a little. He didn’t bring her off her feet—she was like five-nine or five-ten, so he couldn’t have done that sitting on the bike if he’d wanted to—but he wanted her to move.

Standing straight, away from the kiss, she gave him a look and asked, “What?”

“Get on the bike with me. Facing me.”

She tried to pull back, but he kept hold of her hips. “Abel, I—”

“Not gonna do anything you don’t want. I just want you close. Okay?”

For several seconds, she didn’t. She looked wary, for sure. But then she slid her leg over the tank and straddled it. He took her thighs in his hands and brought her close, lifting her legs onto his, their crotches together, nothing but a few layers of fabric between them. It felt maddeningly good. He was completely hard, made of fucking iron, and she gasped in surprise when she landed on him. She tried to push off, but he didn’t let her go.

“Easy, girl. I said I just want you close. Just relax.” He could feel that she was shaking a little.

“What do you want?” She looked hesitant, but she put her hands back on his shoulders.

“Just a kiss. See where that goes. Nowhere you don’t want. Remember, that’s how you’re paying for the lessons. I get to teach you how to kiss.”

She scoffed. “You’ve kissed me a bunch of times now.”

Five. He’d kissed her five times. Not a bunch. And he hadn’t done anything else. He didn’t know where the self-control was coming from. Touched her bare belly once, but that hadn’t gone well. “Yeah, but those weren’t *lessons*.” There was a lot he wanted to teach her, but feeling her weight on him now, he was thinking maybe this hadn’t been such a great idea. He wasn’t in any hurry to end it, though.

He pulled her head to his and kissed her. Since she was agitated and nervous, he started gently, just moving his lips over hers. When he felt her relax a little, her hands moving from his shoulders to his neck, one playing with his ponytail, he kissed her harder, his tongue in her mouth. She'd learned enough to know to use her tongue. She was good at it, too. After a minute or two, she whimpered and shifted her seat a little. Right on his cock. He groaned heavily and broke the kiss, trailing his lips along her jawline and down her neck. Time for Lesson Two.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was low and breathy. He liked the sound of it.

His lips still on her neck, he said, “You like it?” He licked the hollow at the base of her throat.

Though she didn't answer, she squirmed again. Fuck. He was insane. There was no way what they were doing could lead anywhere, even if they were inclined. Scratch that. Even if *she* were inclined. *He* was inclined. He was totally inclined. But they were in a dusty, dead subdivision. More importantly, she was wearing Docs and jeans. Considering their location, might as well be a chastity belt.

Sitting up more, pulling away a little, he smiled. He loved the look of her, her eyes half-lidded, her lips open. She was turned on. He wondered if she knew that was what she was feeling. It turned him on like crazy to think that this was all new to her. “Now, you kiss me like that.”

Her eyes opened all the way, but she didn't hesitate. She licked her lips and went in, pulling his kutte aside to kiss his neck. He felt her tongue on his skin. *Fuck*. She was a quick study. Too quick, maybe. He was more and more sure this was a dumb idea. But he didn't stop. “Fuck, girl.” He took her head in his hands and brought her up to look in her eyes. “You learn fast.” She smiled, shy and pleased. He liked that smile.

When he kissed her again, he wasn't trying to teach her anything.

When he pulled back, she moaned and tightened her arms around his back, trying to hold him close. He flexed his hips against her, so turned on now that he was reconsidering whether they had to stop. There wasn't anybody around. No one would see her without her pants on.

He slid his hands under her t-shirt, feeling the soft silk of her belly. She gasped but didn't stop him. Her muscles under his hands were twitching crazily. He pushed gently, trying to lay her back. She resisted, grabbing his arms. “Abel, wait. Wait.”

He didn't take his hands from her, but he stopped pushing. “Easy, easy.” She settled a little, but she was watching him nervously. “I want to touch you, Hope. I want to unhook your bra. Okay?”

It seemed to him like there was a war going on behind her eyes. He didn't look away; he watched and waited, not moving. After a few tense seconds, still staring at him, she let her hands fall away from his arms.

His heart was racing now. "Oh, good girl," he whispered. He sat forward, pushing her to lay back, and slid his hands up and around her back, bringing her t-shirt with him. Her bra was plain, white satin. Nothing sexy about it. Except that. T-shirt and jeans. Docs. Plain underwear. No makeup. Trying to kick his ass. She wasn't like any other girl he knew. She was young, too young. He didn't fucking care. He unhooked her bra.

Holy shit, her tits were perfect. Fucking perfect. He pushed her shirt and bra up high and just looked at them, saw them shake slightly with her nervous breath. Firm, round, pristine. Slightly more than a handful. Small, perfect brown nipples. His mouth filled with saliva. No one had ever touched them before.

He filled his hands with them and watched her eyes widen. "That good, babe?" She didn't answer. But when he brushed his thumbs over her nipples, she gasped and arched her back, which had the secondary effect of driving her crotch down on his. Her nipples hardened into tight buds. *Fuck, fuck.* He leaned forward and kissed her left breast, just barely sucking it between his lips. Delicious. His eyes rolled back under his closed lids.

Hope moaned and grabbed his head. "Abel, I don't—" Dammit. Panting, he let her lift his head.

"Too much?" He put his hand back where his mouth had been, and she gasped again. Then she did something that rocked him. Still holding his head, she sat forcefully up and kissed him, hard, her tongue pushing right into his mouth.

At first he went with it, happily, wrapping his arms around her and sliding a hand into the back of her jeans, but then he backed off. He couldn't do it, not here. His cock was killing him, but he couldn't take her cherry here in this nasty place. Dammit! "Okay, okay," he gasped, "We need to stop. This is too much for *me*."

"What if I don't want to stop?" That surprised him, and he tried to read her expression. Defiant? Maybe. What the hell?

"Fuck, Hope. You don't know what you're sayin'."

"What makes you think you know what I know or don't?" She squirmed again, intentionally this time. In about fifteen seconds, he was going to strip her ass bare and fuck her hard. He pushed her off his lap and forced her off the bike. "No way. Not here, not now."

Her feelings were obviously hurt. She stood next to the bike, hooking her bra and yanking her shirt back down. He felt bad. And horny. It was a confusing combination he didn't have experience with. "Hope, come on. It's not that I don't—"

She cut him off. “Whatever. Doesn’t matter. You gonna take me back, or should I walk?”

## CHAPTER 9: Frank

“Can we swim, Mama?”

Leo’s question brought Frank back. She’d been staring out the window over the kitchen sink. She hadn’t really been seeing the view of the backyard, with its small fruit orchard, large flagstone patio, and, for the past year or so, the pool Juice had wanted so badly. She’d just been zoned out. The faucet was running. She turned it off and went to the table, where Leo was making a collage of magazine cuttings. He loved to make collages, and he was getting really good with scissors, cutting images out in increasingly precise and interesting ways. Frank was paying attention; he might have some talent.

In the living room, Nora was scream-singing to her favorite program and banging on her toys. Frank needed to get her head straight and focus. She walked around the table and brushed Leo’s mop of dark brown hair back from his forehead. He looked exactly like his daddy, except for his pale blue eyes, like hers. “What’d you say, doodle?”

“Can we swim?” Leo would wear nothing but swim trunks if he could get away with it. He’d probably sleep at the side of the pool if she’d let him. He and Juice had spent hours playing in that water, starting about one minute after the workmen who’d put it in had left. In a lot of ways, even as he neared 50, Juice had always stayed a boy. It was one of the things Frank had loved best about him. He’d never lost his geeky joy in having fun. That enthusiasm, and his boundless love, had made him a fantastic father—and also a huge pushover. The man had not been able to say no.

Frank hadn’t yet seen Leo sad about losing his dad—of course, she’d only been paying attention again for the day. But her boy seemed his usual quiet, focused self. She wondered if that was a bad thing or good. “Sure, we can swim. Go change, and bring me the sunscreen, okay?” He got up and trotted off to do as he was bid.

She was probably the only one in her family who needed sunscreen; both kids had Juice’s complexion, but she always slathered it on them anyway. Nora looked even more like her daddy than Leo did—she had his eyes, too, dark as bittersweet chocolate. Frank went into the living room to collect her fireball of a daughter. She was belting out the parts of “Twinkle, Twinkle” she knew and hitting herself in the head with a stuffed frog. Frank smiled.

“Hey, NoNo—you want to swim?”

“YEAH! SPLASH!” She barreled at her mother and grabbed her legs. “BIG SPLASH!”

Frank picked her up. “You can splash a little.”

“NO! BIG SPLASH!”

Nora was a lot for Frank today. She felt tired and just wanted to get back in bed and nest in her grief for awhile. But there wasn't anyone around. Hope wasn't back yet—and, anyway, Hope needed a break. She was dealing with even more shit than Frank had known.

“Shhh. You have to help me get your suit on, or no splash at all. Okay?”

“KAY, MAMA.”

“Nora, baby, you have to *shhh*. Inside voice, okay? Mama has an ouchie.”

Suddenly, Nora's whole demeanor changed, and in a very small voice, she asked, “Ouchie?” She examined Frank's face and arms, looking for the ouchie. Not really thinking about it, Frank pointed to her chest.

“It's here, baby.”

Nora leaned in and planted a wet kiss over her mother's heart. Frank started to cry, just tears leaking down her cheeks. Nora patted her wet cheek with a chubby hand. “Daddy kiss, too. All better.”

And Frank simply dissolved. She folded her little girl snug in her arms and sat down on the couch, weeping hard. Nora tolerated it for a few minutes, but then began to squirm. “No cry, mama. Big splash.”

With a little wet laugh, Frank loosened her hold on Nora. “Okay, let's swim. Gotta get your suit.” She wiped her eyes and took her daughter back to change for the pool.

-oOo-

Frank sat on the steps in the shallow end of their pool, occasionally tossing brightly-colored weighted rings into the deep end for Leo to swim for. Nora, in her swim diaper and yellow floaty suit, was jumping into the shallow end, going, as advertised, for maximum splash and then bobbing up to the surface like a giggly, spluttery yellow buoy.

Frank watched her kids playing as if it were any normal summer day of their lives, not a day in their new father-less future. It seemed to surreal to her to see them like this. She had to keep reminding herself that she would not be hearing Juice's bike roar up the driveway, that he would not come straight to the pool and just strip down to his boxer briefs right here and jump in to play with his kids. He was not coming home. Ever.

She was alone.

She and Juice had made a family together, and now he'd left her alone to raise it. He had wanted kids desperately. She hadn't at first, not for years. He'd never pressured her, but she saw him with Abel and Thomas, and Hope, and knew there was an empty space in his

life where his own children belonged. She'd finally told him she wanted a baby not because she really did—she had never lost the fear that she'd go nuts and leave them, and the last week had pretty much proved her right on that score—but because she loved him and hated that she'd been refusing to give him this part of life he wanted so much.

And then Leo had been born. It had taken several months to catch, and then the pregnancy had been difficult; her small body wasn't all that well equipped to support a baby. She'd had massive back pain, and toward the end she'd barely been able to walk. She'd spent most of the pregnancy regretting it. But then there was Leo, quiet and perfect. She realized that there had been an empty space in her life, too. She'd wanted another almost right away. Her doctor raised her eyebrows at her but didn't tell her no, and they started trying again while she was still nursing Leo.

But she didn't get pregnant. Not for four years. They did all the tests and never came up with a reason why. They'd given up, when Nora happened. In appearance, they could be twins, five years apart, but they were nothing alike in personality. Where Leo was quiet and contemplative, Nora was loud and rambunctious. Leo had rarely cried. Nora had screamed for about three solid months. Leo had been slow to do anything physical, content to lie on his back and watch. Nora had started walking at nine months. Leo was practically self-rearing. Nora was exhausting.

And Frank adored her, shouting and all. She couldn't believe how much she loved being a mom. She loved it like it was a calling. She used to say she was aunt material, not mom material. She'd been a moron.

She loved it so much, they'd been hoping for another one. Not really planning—it had been stressful always to be waiting to be pregnant with Nora—but letting nature do what it would and hoping. Frank was 42. Getting up there a little, but there was still time. There had been, anyway. Until last week. Until last week, they'd been giving it their best—

Frank's thoughts stopped dead as a new one intruded. They'd been letting nature take its course, hoping she'd get pregnant. She hadn't been on the Pill, not since they'd started trying for Leo. She never even thought of contraception any longer.

She never even thought.

*Jesus motherfucking Christ.*

## CHAPTER 10: Hope

As soon as Abel pulled up to the garage and had stopped, Hope was off the back of his bike and handing him the helmet he'd lent her. She was so embarrassed; she never felt like this, ever. Every single part of her life just sucked. She was done. Just done with all of it.

Abel killed the engine. "Hope, come on. Don't be mad. You're not supposed to be mad because I stopped. That's not how it's supposed to go. Fuck!" He kicked the stand down, like he thought he was staying.

"I'm not—just go. It's fine. I just have stuff I need to do." She wanted him away, right now, so she could try to stop thinking about what she'd let him do, what she'd wanted him to do. What he didn't want to do with her.

He got off his bike anyway and grabbed her arm. She could hear the kids in the pool, so they probably had an audience. Not wanting to start some kind of scene, she didn't pull away. "You got a hair trigger, girl. You got no need to be mad. I didn't want to stop—I just didn't want to get you naked out there. I was trying to be a good guy, for fuck's sake. If you want it, I'll figure out a place to go, okay?"

No! That's not what she wanted. Was it? She thought of Frank and her dad doing it, and it made her sick. But the way Abel touched her on his bike, where he'd put his mouth, it had all made her feel really weird. Good, but weird, like she wasn't driving her own body. She wasn't mad at him, though, not really. She was mad at herself. Humiliated. And she wanted to get away from him right now. "No—just. Just no. I'm so confused. I want you to go, okay?"

He gave her a furrowed stare, and then he leaned in and kissed her quickly on the lips. "I'll see ya—we'll do another riding lesson, okay?"

Her arms crossed protectively over her chest, she watched him go. When he'd cleared the driveway and was on the road, she turned toward the house. Frank was standing at the gate to the pool, watching. Hope waved vaguely and headed inside. She didn't need to deal with *that* now, too.

She went straight back to her room and closed the door. Was it her room still? She guessed so; Frank probably still needed her around. But it was so weird now. Frank and her dad had sex! She could hear him, like, grunting last night. Hope's stomach clenched, and for a second she thought she might need to puke, but then it settled.

And then she'd gone and gotten all slutty with Abel. As she thought of him, the image rose up of him leaning over her, his hands on her boobs, and she got that weird feeling between her legs again. She pushed her hand between her legs and held it hard against herself, trying to make it stop. It didn't work. She wasn't an idiot; she knew what it probably was. Her mom had signed the permission slips so she could take the sex ed

classes. And she'd seen more around the clubhouse than anybody knew. But that was like watching zoo animals mating—just weird. She'd never touched herself, not really. She'd tried a couple of times, but it was embarrassing, and she didn't see the point.

But what Abel had done. His hands on her had felt . . . awesome. Again, the image was there, and again everything clenched between her legs. She felt restless. She put her own hands on her boobs; wasn't remotely the same.

She'd acted like one of the spangly girls that hung out at the clubhouse and all her uncles thought she believed were "assistants." The ones the Sons called Crow Eaters, except around the kids.

She'd really wanted Abel to go all the way with her, though. She didn't understand herself. She was pretty sure she wouldn't have stopped, and she wasn't even sure she liked Abel that much. He was being nice now, but there was a lot of jerky stuff she'd need to forgive and forget about before she could, like, really like him. And she didn't want that, anyway. She didn't want a boyfriend. She didn't like always being around *anybody*.

She heard the kids and Frank come in, everybody moving past her room to change back into regular clothes. She wondered if Frank expected her to make dinner tonight. She wondered if she could sit at a table with Frank and be okay. She felt guilty; it wasn't Frank's fault. She was crazy. Her father was a big perv. But she kept thinking of Frank under him like that. She couldn't stop imagining it.

Her father had come back for Frank. Then they'd slept together. Were they going to be, like, *together*? Hope's gorge rose again.

She was so confused. She plopped down on the bed and put a pillow over her face. Her head was going to explode if she didn't tell somebody something. But there was no one. She could probably have talked to her mother. She would definitely have talked to Frank. She might even have talked to Thomas, though that would have been a different kind of conversation. Now there was no one.

She felt more alone than she had when her dad was gone.

A knock at her door. "Hope? I'm gonna ask Kevin to bring us pizza and wings and stay for dinner, okay?"

"Yeah, fine!" she called without moving.

She didn't hear more for a few seconds, then, "I'm gonna come in, okay?"

That was the last thing she wanted. "Not right now, Frank."

The door opened anyway. Frank looked pale and distracted. “I think we should talk, kiddo. Your dad was here earlier. He told me what happened between you two.”

*Oh my God!* Hope sat bolt upright. Now she didn’t even have the option to pretend it hadn’t happened. It was like everyone she knew was trying to find ways to torture her. She’d told him to stay away, and he hadn’t even made it a day. Too bad he hadn’t been so persistent a few months ago! “I don’t want to talk about it. No. No!”

Frank sat down on the bed. Her arm had a new bandage. “Your dad’s all torn up over it, Hope. He’s mad at himself for hurting you.”

Fine. They’d talk. Whatever. “But he didn’t hurt you? You’re okay that it happened?” She didn’t want that answer. That was a scary answer—why she’d asked the question, she had no idea.

“No, he didn’t hurt me. He helped me. It’s complicated, kiddo.” She looked out the window. “Really complicated.”

That was just what people said when their reason didn’t make any sense. But why should it? Nothing made sense. Her life was on a tilt-a-whirl, and she couldn’t make sense of anything around her. “AGH! I don’t want to talk about this!!”

Frank grabbed her shoulders. “Hope, you have to listen. What happened last night was about how much I love Juice and about how much your dad loves your mom. I know that sounds weird, but it’s true. I promise. It was solace.”

“Do you love him?”

“Juice? God, Hope, yes. I love him so much. I’m so fucking sad.”

“No, do you love my dad?”

“Oh. Yes, very much. But not the way you mean. I love him like I always have. Last night didn’t change anything, Hope. Except that it woke me up, and I needed to wake up.” Again she looked away. “It doesn’t need to change anything.”

Hope shook her head. “It changes everything. He didn’t come back for me. He came back for you.” She couldn’t take it anymore. She was going to burst into a million molecules and just vaporize. If only that were true. She threw herself face down on the bed and wept.

“Oh, Hope, that’s not true. He’s here for you. If you want him, he’s waiting. He loves you more than anybody.” She felt Frank’s hand on her back, but she shook it off.

“Please go away!”

“I love you, kiddo. I’m sorry.” After a minute, she felt the bed shift slightly as Frank stood up, and then she heard the door latch.

She was alone.

-oOo-

Next thing Hope knew, it was full dark; she’d fallen asleep. She looked at her clock: almost midnight. She’d slept for hours. She sat up and kicked something off the bed as she did. She switched on the nightstand light and looked down at the floor: a velvet box and a white envelope with a pink sticky note. She picked them up and sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed. The sticky note read:

*Your dad left these for you when he was here. I’m really sorry you’re hurting, kid. I’m here if you need me. Love, Frank*

Hope recognized the velvet box, and her heart was aching before she’d opened the lid. Her mom’s jewelry. She’d had lots of other jewelry, but all that was just baubles and froufrou. The black opal—that was really her jewelry. Her mom used to let her try the pieces on and swing back and forth in front of the mirror, watching the way the light changed the gems. And she’d tell her stories about Granny Belle, who’d been a fancy singer like in the old movies, in slinky satin dresses, bright red nails and lips, and her hair rolled back on the sides of her head.

Hope brushed her fingers over the pendant, and then the ring. She couldn’t take them out of the box. She couldn’t wear them. If she had this jewelry, it meant her mom was really gone. She wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready. She would never be ready. She closed the box.

She picked the envelope up and pulled the sticky note off—and saw her name in her mother’s handwriting. She knew what it was. Crying hard now, she set it aside. No death letter from her mother. No. Absolutely not. No. There was only so much torture she could take.

She picked up the box and the sealed envelope and put them both gently in the drawer of the nightstand.

## CHAPTER 11: Happy

Hap had been back for two weeks. Two weeks since Juice's funeral. Two weeks since the night after Juice's funeral, and Hope had avoided him the whole time. She didn't return his calls. If she was there when he went to Frank's house, she locked herself in her room.

He didn't know what to do. He really had destroyed his family completely, and he saw no fix for it at all. He wondered—would he have stayed if he'd read Vivian's letter right away, before he'd left? Even in that red, pulsing rage, would he have heeded her admonition not to run?

Of course he would have. He would never have refused her. But he hadn't found her letter in time to stop him from tearing everything down.

Being at the house on his own was eating him alive. He was surrounded by the loss of his family, everywhere he turned. But he stayed. He'd bought that house with Vivian—for Vivian. He would live there until he died, just as she had.

He went home every night to that dark, dead house and opened a bottle of Jack. Often, he sat in the gloom of the living room with Vivian's laptop on his knees. Pepboy had shown him where her videos were and how to get to them, but he hadn't yet been able to watch them. That torment was a fire in his head and heart. He wanted more than *anything* to hear her voice again. He wanted more than *anything* the chance to see her smiling and laughing, or just talking, or just *fucking breathing*.

But those videos were the last of her. The last things she'd ever say to him. Ever. The last of her. The last of them. The last of everything. They would only be new one time; then, they'd be like everything else of her: dead. In the past. He couldn't watch them. But the thought of their promise, and what he was missing, burned pain into every groove of his brain.

He parked in the Teller Automotive lot and strode into the clubhouse. It was still strange being back. Jax had refused to take his VP patch, and it was even stranger sitting at his left after everything. And sitting at the table with Abel was driving him crazy. Knowing—*knowing*—that Abel was seeing Hope when he could not, when he could do nothing about that shit pushing up on his perfect girl. He guessed he'd earned that torment, as he'd earned all the rest.

He would never call Abel Teller brother. He wanted him dead.

As he entered the clubhouse, the Sons around the barroom looked up and acknowledged him in one fashion or another, including Abel, who gave him a nod. Hap ignored him and crossed the room, walking straight into the chapel, where he knew Jax and Chibs were waiting for him.

Jax was going over some intel, reading some electronic thing, sitting at the head of the table, a seat he'd held for almost twenty years—longer than either his father or his stepfather. Hap stepped in and closed the door behind him. “You wanted to see me, boss?”

“Yeah, bro. Have a seat.” Jax nodded and indicated the seat to his left. Chibs was at his right. He nodded cordially at Hap. “How ya doin', brutha?”

Hap nodded back, silently.

He sat, still uncomfortable in the VP seat. He'd held it now for a few years, since Bobby's death, and he'd done his best. He always did his best for the club. But the mantle of leadership sat uneasy on his shoulders. He'd been content as a soldier. He'd also hated bringing Phil up to take over his role of enforcer. The big guy had surprised Hap and turned out to be good in the role, despite his mild-mannered demeanor. Or maybe because of it. There were depths of innovative depravity inside that wide belly that no one who hadn't seen would ever believe.

No, Hap hated being displaced from the role because he'd loved it. He'd *defined* it. He took no small measure of pride in his renown throughout SOA, across the globe. That reputation stood unblemished, but he no longer added to the legend. Now, it was his word, his counsel, that sent Phil out to rain terror and blood—though even that happened rarely, these days.

He leaned forward, his arms on the carved redwood table. “What's up?”

The charter President leaned back in his leather chair and stroked his long, golden-grey beard. He had started to go bald a few years back, so he wore his hair close-cropped now. He turned the electronic gizmo so that Hap could see it. Hap preferred paper. People were using these things all the time now, and he hated it. He glanced down suspiciously. “What is it?”

“SAMBEL is asking us to open up our IRA pipeline again. The Cause has been in a rough way with what's been going on in Europe past few years. And here, with the Oakland crews at war and distracted, and Galindo brought down by the CIA, it's all drying up on both sides of the deal. They're leaning on SAMBEL to go back to the beginning.”

Christ. SAMCRO had been earning 90% legit for the past five years at least. The job that had put Hap inside had been toward the tail end of their last serious outlaw phase—a long five-year slog. His arrest and conviction had been the catalyst for them to pull back. Now they were all porn, escorts, and protection runs. Some enforcement and collection work was about all they'd been doing on the wrong side of Joe Law.

The Sons who knew the cartel days were getting grey and slow: Jax, Hap, Chibs, Tig, and Phil. Joey, Pep, Freddy, Butch, and . . . Abel—at best, they'd dabbled in that dark game.

The IRA work had never been hot like the cartel had, but it was still hardcore. Could put them back on terror watchlists and draw Fed attention.

“What do you need from me?” Hap looked from Jax to Chibs.

“Counsel, bro. You got a long memory. Chibs has said his piece, wants back in.”

“I freely admit me personal stake, though, brutha. Got Kerrienne an’ me grandbabies there.”

Hap leaned in toward Chibs across the table. “They bein’ threatened?”

“Naw, not like that. Jes’ rough, an’ their da’ is workin’ fer the Cause.”

Jax leaned toward him. “The men around this table or either grey or untested. I need to know if you think we’re up to bringing the outlaw back.”

Nodding, Hap sat back and gave it some thought. An ember caught in his belly at the thought of getting back to the outlaw life. Felt like something he could use, something he’d been really good at. Something that took up a lot of time and attention. He sat forward again.

“Club was untested when your dad set up SAMBEL and made the first IRA alliance. Your boy’s the only one hasn’t known rough times. If you asked me if we were ready to mule drugs for the Mexicans again, I’d say no way. But we can run guns. Three of us and Tig? We could run guns from motorized wheelchairs. I say take it to the table.”

Jax sighed, as if he were both relieved and concerned. “The Oakland crews will beef with us soon as they take a break from beefing with each other. We’re stepping in and profiting from their broken truce. But I think you’re right. We take it to the table and advise for it. Agreed?” Hap and Chibs nodded.

“Once it’s voted, the three of us need to ride up to Tacoma, start getting the pipeline reopened. Y’all good for a run tomorrow?”

Thus agreed, Chibs stood and turned to go. Hap started to rise as well, by Jax put his hand on his arm. “Hang on, Hap. Got something else to go over with you.”

Chibs went on out, so it wasn’t business. Hap suspected he knew what it was. “Yeah?”

“You and I need to figure out what the line is with Abel and Hope.” As Hap began to interject, Jax held up his hand. “I am *not* gonna tell you what you should do to keep your girl safe. I told you I wouldn’t get between you and Abel if he kept this shit up, and I meant it. You know I know about my boy’s flaws. And I love Hope like my own. I don’t like this, either, Hap. But it’s goin’ on. And you don’t have Hope’s ear.”

There must be a reason Jax wanted to talk about this now. “What do you know?”

Jax shook his head. “Just that they’re spending time together, few times a week. I talked to him, and he knows I won’t stop a beatdown from you.” He leaned forward. “*Just* a beatdown, Hap. I can see in your eyes what you want to do. I won’t let you go farther than a beating, and I want you to think twice about that. There might be somethin’ between them. Not even Abel’s reckless enough to play chicken with you without a real compellin’ prize, and the boy won’t back off.”

Hap could not believe what he was hearing. The rage came on him, but he kept his seat. He couldn’t keep his voice steady, though. “You tellin’ me to let your 23-year-old boy fuck my 17-year-old daughter?”

Jax obviously saw and heard Hap’s emotion, but he didn’t back down. “22. Not 23 ‘til next month. And no. I’m not tellin’ you anything. I’m *advising* you, brother to brother. I know you didn’t love until late, so you don’t know what young love is like. I do. It made me crazy and stupid. If there’s somethin’ catchin’ between my boy and your girl, then we need to sit back a bit. Watch, be there if it goes to shit, but let it run. And I promise you, he hurts her, I’ll hold his arms while you beat him down.”

Hap pushed back from the table in disgust. It was all he could do not to jump up and wrap his hands around Jax’s throat. “That it?”

Sighing, Jax nodded. “Hap, brother—“

“I’ll take it under *advisement*. We done then?”

-oOo-

The club voted the IRA back in. Hap went home to his dark house that night and prepped his pack for a several-day run. He called Hope and left her a message, telling her he was going on a run, where he’d be, and when he’d be back. The sound of her voice on her outgoing message was still his only contact with her.

But she was seeing Abel a few times a week. Considering that boy’s lively rotation through the ‘Eaters, if he was spending that much time with Hope, he had to believe they were—he punched the wall. No. No, he wouldn’t think that. He couldn’t.

He grabbed the Jack and went into the living room. Vivian’s laptop was on the coffee table. Pepboy had told him that the battery had been dead when he’d found it in the music room, so now he kept it plugged in, in case he ever opened it.

He opened it. It made a very faint sound, and then a picture came on the screen—the three of them in the backyard, Hap sitting in a chair, his girls leaning in on either side of him, their wild hair framing his head. A box for a password came up over the picture. A lump in his throat and an itch behind his eyes, Hap typed in *happy+viv=hope*. The

password box went away, and several rows of small pictures came up. As Pep had shown him, he clicked the one called “Hap.” His fingers shook.

Vivian filled the screen, sitting in the sunny music room, the piano in the background. Smiling. She was bald and bareheaded, the henna snake he’d drawn on her scalp still vivid. She’d died within three weeks of the day he’d done that for her.

She was wearing a cheerful red cotton blouse, one of the tops she called her “hippie shirts.” And the black opal jewelry. She sat with the Martin on her lap. When the video opened, her arms rested on the top edge of the guitar, her head in one hand. She was pale and gaunt, with dark shadows under her eyes and cheekbones. She was beautiful.

He couldn’t stop his tears. He didn’t even try. He reached out and put his hand on the screen, tracing his fingers over her sweet, smiling face.

“Hey, Hap. I hope you’re doin’ okay. I’m so sorry I couldn’t stay. Really pissed the fuck off, you want the truth of it. I left you a long, sappy letter, too. Not sure whether you’ll find this or that first—probably that, but just in case: it’s in my second jewelry drawer. I put it towards the back so you don’t come across it before I croak, because *that* would be awkward. It’s with this stuff.” She held up her pendant. “I want to be sure you give this to Hope. Don’t give a shit about the rest of it, but this stuff I want her to have. Tell her I’ll torment her eternally if she sells it or something. I’m kidding—don’t tell her that. Just say I’d like her to keep it. All we’ve really got of my Granny.

“Also, do me a favor, please. Can you even deny deathbed favor requests? I bet there’s a rule about that somewhere: I made a video for Hope, too. Easy to find, it’s the only one named just “Hope,” right where you found this one. Watch it before she does, okay? If she’s struggling and you think it would make it worse, just don’t tell her about it, not till she’s ready. I also wrote her a letter—go ahead and give her that right away, please.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to turn this thing into a list of instructions. Just—you’ll find the jewelry and a letter for each of you. Thought about tying it up in a ribbon, but that seems, I don’t know, too Victorian or something, like I died of the vapors, so I’m just sticking a hairband around it.” Hap looked down at the band still around his wrist; he hadn’t taken it off. He didn’t think he ever would. “Anyway, I wrote a new song for you.” She laughed sheepishly, and Hap’s balls tightened at the sound. Tears were running freely now. “Is that sappy? It’s sappy, I know. I’m turning into every movie death cliché ever. Oh, well.”

She shifted and began picking the Martin, several bars of a sad, pretty tune. He’d been listening to her music for nearly twenty years, so he recognized the style she was playing as folk. Then, she started to sing. Her voice wasn’t as strong as it had been, because she had been so weak close to the end. But it was still sultry and beautiful, and it made Hap’s heart wail to hear it.

*I’m sorry, my love, that you’re on your own;  
I wanted a longer life with you.*

*I'm sorry, my love, to leave you alone,  
But know my love for you is true.*

*I'm sorry, my love, to leave you alone  
In a world so bitter and bleak.  
I'm sorry, my love, that our time has flown  
Before all the words we could speak.*

*I'm sorry, my love, that our time has flown  
I wanted another age with you.  
I'm sorry, my love, that you're on your own;  
And that I can't see you through.*

*I'm sorry, my love, that you're on your own;  
I wanted a longer life with you.  
I'm, sorry, my love, to leave you alone,  
But know my love for you is true.*

*But know my love for you is true.  
Know my love for you is true,  
My love for you is true.*

She plucked for a few more bars, letting the song fade to an end. Then she rested her arms again on the Martin and looked right into the camera. Her eyes were bright and brimming with tears.

“So, it’s not much, I know, but I wanted to leave you a goodbye. Hap, if somebody, some genie or somethin’ came and told me I could live for another fifty years, keep my health, keep my hair”—she laughed drily—“and all I’d have to do is give up one single minute, one single *second* of my life with you, I’d send that asshole on his way. Not one second, not even if I could choose. Even the shitty stuff, because that made us what we are now. I got off easy. I don’t have to miss you. And I’m so fucking sorry that I have to go. But Lord, Hap, we were good. Remember that. We had that. You don’t ever have to lose what we had. That’s yours to keep.

“You told me a long, long time ago not to call you this, and I haven’t, not in all those years. I’m gonna now, though, for two reasons—one, to remind you of when we were new and had years of a life together ahead of us that we didn’t even know about yet, and two, because it’s a good word, and I like it for emphasis, and I’m still that ballsy broad singin’ Janis and shakin’ my tits at you.

“Baby, I love you. Be good, take care of our girl. Take care of *yourself*. Love you like I do. You deserve it.

She leaned in and kissed the camera, then sat back with a wink. A tear dropped down her cheek. “Gotta go. I’ll see ya, okay?”

The screen went dark.

Hap tipped his head back and howled.

## CHAPTER 12: Abel

Abel pulled up his parents' driveway and parked in front of the garage. Hope dismounted, and then he did. She was staring at him, her brow furrowed.

"Why'd you bring me here? I thought you were gonna give me another lesson."

"I am. I was thinking it was time you really got on the road. You okay with that?"

Her smile was huge and blinding. "Yeah! But—I don't get it. Why are we at your house?"

Abel reached into his pocket and pushed the remote for the garage door, opening the one on the far left. "I'm not letting you take my new bike into traffic, girl. You can ride this."

His first bike, a gift from his parents for his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, was sitting in the middle of the space. A little Street Bob with red, big-flake metallic paint. He'd polished it up for her. She walked into the garage, straight to the bike. "Seriously?"

"Sure. It's just a loan—and we have to figure out how to tell your dad before you're boppin' all over Charming on it. You're gonna need a license, too."

"Wait—you mean you're letting me *take* it?" She looked at him with her mouth hanging open. Even slack-jawed she was hot.

She was hot. That had to be why he was taking all these crazy risks for her. In addition to courting Happy's wrath, he was in Dutch with half the club for seeing her at all, and he was adding to his woes every time he did. Blowing shit off he shouldn't have. He'd gotten pulled from a protection run last week to work the garage, because he'd left Kev to work that tranny job, which had of course gone to hell. And he'd blown off a vigil shift at the hospital for Freddy. That boy was a vegetable, and he was going to stay a vegetable. Sad, but true. Abel didn't get why there had to be a Son there 24/7, and he hadn't expected to be caught missing his shift to watch Hope tooling up and down deserted streets.

Now he was giving her a bike. He'd taught her to ride—which no one knew about yet—and he was giving her the means to do it. He was going to end up with Hap's boot so far up his ass he'd be able to chew on it. If he was lucky.

Crazy risks. And yet he kept on taking them.

"Like I said, just a loan until you can get your own. *If* today's lesson goes okay. And keep it on the down low for now."

With a smirk and a pop of her hip, she snorted, "Kinda hard to keep this pussy paint on the down low."

“Hey—you’re dissin’ the bike I’m lettin’ you ride? For real?” He was embarrassed about the red metallic now, to be honest. He’d loved it then—the best part had been how different it was from his dad’s bike. Flashier.

“I’m just teasing. It’s awesome, Abel. Really awesome. Thank you!” She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, making him think about other things than riding he wanted to teach her today.

He set her back, pulling her arms down from his neck. “Okay. First thing, though, we’re gonna drop the bike, see if you can get it back up on your own. If you can’t, the lessons are over. Can’t go out on a bike you can’t get back on its wheels by yourself.” He laid the bike on its side.

“Bike weighs over 600 pounds, so you need to know the trick. C’mere, sit down on the side of the saddle.” She came over and did as he said. “Now grab the handlebars, low, with your left hand. Soon as you can, you’re gonna grab the seat shock with your right.”

He showed her how to use her body weight to rock it until she could get her feet under her and walk it to standing, then stop before it went the other way. The first time, she didn’t quite make it, and the bike went over the other side, bringing her with it as she tried to stop its fall. She wasn’t hurt, but the sound of the impact made Abel a little ill. He set it back up himself that time—and did it deadlift style, showing off some—so he could look it over. It looked okay.

The second time, she got it. And the third. She had it. “Okay, stud. You ready to ride, then? Out in traffic?” By now he’d had her all over that dead subdivision and had talked her through riding scenarios, but there was nothing for really learning but getting on the road. Fuck, though. Something happened to her and he was gonna have to hightail it to South America. He couldn’t believe he was teaching her how to do this. The girl made him stupid.

He took her out on 99, with less traffic than the interstate, and out of town, with its too many eyes. Then he took her onto a side road with a good straightaway. They’d been riding side by side, but as soon as she saw the road stretching straight before her, she hit the throttle and took off like a bat outta hell. Abel saw the end of his life right up there on that sparkly red bike. He sped up to pass her and slow her down. She was laughing crazily, a huge, bug-eating grin on her face. She was fucking adorable.

When they got back to his folks’ house a couple of hours later, she attacked him as soon as they were both dismounted, before their helmets were even off, hugging him tightly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I haven’t felt this good since my mom—” She stopped and stepped back.

“Since your mom got sick.”

She looked up sharply, as if she were surprised at how he'd finished her sentence. "Yeah. Since she got sick. Since before she died."

He reached to unfasten her helmet and take it off her head. As soon as she was free of it, she shook her hair out. She always did that, and it was always hot. He took his own helmet off, too, and put it on his bike. He set hers on the Street Bob. "Hey—you want to go inside for awhile, get something to drink?" His dad was on a run, his mom was at a conference. The house was his. He hadn't gotten any farther than her boobs yet; she'd been a lot more reserved since the day he'd had her straddling his lap on the bike. He didn't know if he was going to get a better opportunity than this one. As long as he was risking life and limb today, might as well make the most of it.

She gave him a very sexy, shy smile. "Okay, sure." Grinning, he took her hand and led her into the house.

He felt awkward as soon as they got inside, and she looked like she felt the same way. She shrugged off her jacket and draped it on one of the chairs at the kitchen island. She was wearing a plain white t-shirt; he could see the outline of her plain white bra under it. His cock really appreciated the view. Shaking his head a little to refocus, he opened the fridge and pulled out two beers. He twisted the tops off and held one out to her. She hesitated, making a face that was gone in a second, then took the bottle from him.

"You don't like beer?" He took a pull from his own bottle.

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's okay, I guess."

"Hope. You ever been drunk?"

She was defensive right away. "No. So? I've been at the clubhouse on Saturday morning. I know what drunk looks like. I don't get it. Doesn't look fun at all."

"No, you know what *hung over* looks like. I can't believe you came up in the same clubhouse I did and haven't ever been drunk! Fuck, Chibs got me drunk when I was like 14! By the way, a Jameson hangover—that's getting thrown in the deep end, lemme tell ya."

"Yeah, nobody did that with me."

He could see that. Everybody had always treated Hope like she was made of glass or something. Her lip trembled, and they all about wet themselves trying to fix whatever was wrong. He caught the brunt of that more than a few times when he was younger. He knew he'd been mean to her. But it had bugged the shit out of him, everybody fawning all over her like she was some rare treasure. Hell, he was dealing with it now, the wall of uncles between them. He was one of them now, and they were still acting like he was a threat.

“What about school? I got drunk all the time at parties with kids from school. Free booze was about the only thing those assholes were good for.”

Another shrug. “Never went to a party.”

“Jesus, Hope. Why not?”

And she shrugged again. “Never got invited. People don’t like me. S’okay. I don’t like them back. Most people confuse the hell out of me.”

He thought about asking why, but that was a different topic, and he was still on the one where it turned out Hope had basically been living under a rock. “I didn’t get invited much, either. You never crashed a school party?”

A harsh laugh at that. “Why would I? I didn’t want to hang around those jerks any more than I had to.”

He finished his beer and set the empty on the counter. Then he stood in front of Hope, where she rested against the counter, and framed her body with his. “So, let me get this straight. 17 years old, never been drunk. Can’t drive. Never been kissed—until recently, that is.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her, and she rolled her eyes. “You’re more Catholic schoolgirl than biker’s kid. How’d you manage that?”

“You know who my dad is, right?”

Yeah, he sure did, and she was making an excellent point. The smart call would be to back off and take her home—leaving the Bob right where it was parked. Instead, he said, “You should drink your beer, Hope.”

“Why?”

Coming in close, his lips almost touching hers, he said, “You ever wonder what could be worth that hangover on Saturday morning? Must be pretty great, right?”

Turning her head to the side, she took a sip and made a face. He laughed. “It gets better, trust me. Go on, now. Drink.”

While she worked on her first beer, he pulled a second and downed that. He noticed that she was drinking more eagerly by about the halfway point. When she finished, she set the empty down with a victorious flourish and grinned at him. “There. Happy?”

Abel took a good look at her eyes. She wasn’t drunk, but she was buzzed. Much more relaxed than she was when they came in. Him, too. Yes, he was happy. He grabbed her hips and pulled her close. “You ready for another lesson?”

She snorted. “Jeez. What now? You gonna tell me what you think I owe you for taking me on the road?”

“*And* lending you my bike. But no, nothing like that. This lesson’s free—we’ll do what you want.”

“What I want? What do *you* want?”

He briefly considered just saying outright that he wanted to fuck her blue, but he kept a lid on that and said, “I want to see you naked. I want to touch you. Then see what happens.”

She was quiet, studying him. “Where’re your folks?” That was not a no. Abel smiled.

He brushed a stray hair from her eyes and combed it back with his fingers. “My dad’s on a run—with your dad and Chibs, you know that. My mom’s in San Francisco for a conference. No one here but us.”

“Will you get naked, too?” She put a hand under his t-shirt and rested it on his side, above his hip. First time she’d touched him under his clothes at all. Her hand felt awesome.

Holy fuck. This was going to happen. “If you want me to.”

“Okay.”

He took her hand and led her upstairs to his room.

-oOo-

When he got her into his room—thank God the maids had been around yesterday and he hadn’t—he closed the door. She stopped and turned to him, looking shy and nervous. She giggled. He was pretty sure he’d never heard that sound coming out of her mouth before. So cute. He caught her by a belt loop and pulled her to him.

“C’mere, babe.” He fed a hand into her silky mop of waves and held her head as he came in for a deep kiss. She responded right away, sliding her hands under his kutte and around his waist. They tangled tongues for a few minutes, but when Hope moaned into his mouth, he decided it was time to move things along. He took the hem of her t-shirt in his hands and lifted.

She broke the kiss and stepped back. Abel kept hold of her shirt, though. “Hope? I thought you wanted this.”

She blushed. That was a first, too. “Yeah, just—I want to do it.”

He really wanted to take her clothes off, feel her legs sliding out of those jeans. But he nodded. “Okay. You want me to take mine off?”

Nodding, she pulled her t-shirt off. He stood and watched as, abrupt and business-like, she reached down and unzipped her boots, kicking them off, then stripped her jeans and socks off. She was standing there in her white satin bra and her little cotton panties with blue butterflies. Fuck, she was cute. She slid her thumbs into the elastic band of her underwear, but Abel stopped her. “Hold up, babe. I wanna look a sec.” He slid his hands over the fabric on her ass, giving her a squeeze. “Damn, girl. You are fucking gorgeous.” He reached back with one hand and unhooked her bra. She didn’t protest, just shrugged its straps off her shoulders and let it drop from her arms.

He wanted her on her back. Kissing her again, he walked her backwards until her legs hit the mattress, and then he gently pushed her down. She lay back, her arms over her chest. “Don’t cover up, babe. Those are too pretty to hide.”

She ignored him. “You said you were going to get naked, too.”

He laughed. “You’re right; hold on.” He rid himself of his clothes as quickly as he could, tossing even his kutte wherever. He saw her watching; she didn’t react when she saw his hard cock. Girls usually did, but Hope just gave it a once-over and moved on to the rest of him. They’d been swimming enough together that the rest of his body couldn’t have been that much of a surprise.

Then again, hers was a fucking revelation, and he’d seen her in bikinis. He didn’t know why, but it was true.

He did a quick mental inventory of his nightstand drawer and slid into bed next to her, pulling her close and leaning over her right away. He pulled her arms away from her chest. She was shaking hard and looked scared.

“Hey, easy. You want to stop?” Fuck, he didn’t want her answer to be yes. When she shook her head, he blew out a sigh of relief. “You know what we’re doing here, Hope?”

“You want to have sex.” She looked him dead in the eye.

He grinned. As inexperienced and shy as she was, she wasn’t one to hide. “I do. Do you want to?”

“I’m—yeah. I don’t know. Yeah. I don’t know.”

That made him laugh and groan simultaneously. “Let’s take it slow, okay? You say when.” He put his hand on her tight belly and leaned down to take one of her fantastic tits into his mouth, suckling her gently. She arched up right away and put her hands on his head, holding him to her out of what must have been instinct. He felt her pulling at the

band around his hair, so he reached back and yanked it free, letting his hair fall loose around his head and over her chest. She arched at that, too.

He pulled away and looked down into her face. Her eyes were shut tight. “Hope. Hope, look at me.” She opened her eyes and met his. “I’d like you to touch me. Will you?” When she nodded, he rolled to his back, bringing her with him.

“Where do you want me to touch you?” She whispered it, but she was looking at him boldly.

He winked. “Anywhere you want, babe. I’ll like it all. Like you to get to my cock eventually, but start where you want. No rush.”

She started at his shoulders, tracing her fingers along the shapes of the muscles in his arms, then his chest, then his belly. Her touch was light and unpracticed, but not hesitant. He watched her; she looked intent and fascinated, and his cock swelled a little more.

As her hands passed his belly button, he started to get twitchy, trying to send his thoughts at her or something, will her to get down to business. But she traced the sides of his hips and moved on to his legs. Had she gone and gotten lessons in teasing while he wasn’t looking?

Finally, when he was squirmy himself and about ready to grab her and flip their positions again, she arrived at his crotch and stopped. He looked down and saw her staring at his cock. “Babe?”

She turn her eyes to his. “Why do you call me that? What do you mean by it?”

He was confused. “What?”

“Babe. You call me that sometimes. Why?”

“I—I don’t know. It just . . . comes out, I guess. Does it have to mean somethin’?”

She shrugged. “I’m just trying to figure out what you want with me. You’re doing all these nice things for me—teaching me to ride, lending me your bike, talking to me like you care what I have to say. That all just for this? Is this just . . . payment?”

Fuck, they were having a relationship talk? Now? He should have given her another beer. He sat up.

“No, it’s not payment. I’m nice to you because I like you, and I like being nice to you. I told you that already. I want to have sex because I like you, and you’re hot. It’s not payment. That was a joke, mostly. But that’s all I got, Hope. I like spending time with you. I don’t know more.”

She considered that, then nodded. “Okay. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with this,” she indicated his cock, decidedly changing the subject. He was pleased and surprised to see that the very uncomfortable and strange conversation they’d just had had done nothing to soften him.

He laughed. “Put your hand around it and stroke up and down, not too hard.”

She took his instruction, and he dropped back to the bed with a groan. “Fuck, girl, you got it. That. Do that. Oh, yeah. Yeah.” She felt great, and got confidence with every stroke, until he was having trouble focusing. On a down stroke, she ran her fingers over his balls, and he sat up. He didn’t want to come all over her. “Okay, that’ll do.”

“D’I hurt you?” Her brow was wrinkled in apprehension.

“No, no. Just time to move on. You still good?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Then I want to get your panties off. That okay?”

She slid them off and kicked them away. He rolled, laying her back on the bed, and moved his hand down her waist, over her hip, to her mound, covered with soft, black down, trimmed to a neat bikini line. Hope was a natural girl, sure, but she wanted to look good in her bathing suit.

He slid his hand between her legs and pressed against her mound. Her shaky breaths became a sharp gasp, and she sat up a little, resting on her elbows to watch him. He slid his fingers over her clit, and she cried out, “Wait! What?”

She was wet. She was shaking. She was panting. She was staring at him in surprise. Fuck. Fuck, he wanted her bad. It was making him crazy. Everything was new for her. From her reaction, it seemed like she hadn’t even done this to *herself*. Licking his lips, he murmured, “I can make you feel so good, Hope. Lay back. Let me make you feel good. Come on, babe. Relax. Let me.”

## CHAPTER 13: Hope

Hope was propped on her elbows, freaking out. Abel's hand was between her legs, his fingers making her feel so weird. When she'd touched herself there it hadn't felt anything like this. Her whole body felt like it was too big or too hot or too something for her skin. She didn't know how to think about what she felt. She was scared, but she didn't want him to stop. She just wanted to be able to understand it.

Abel was leaning on an elbow over her; now he swung his forearm toward her and grabbed her elbow, pulling it out from under her. "Lay back, Hope. It's okay. It'll be so good, I promise."

She let him pull her arm; she lay back. "Good girl," he whispered. And then he moved his fingers. "Ah, Hope, you're so slick and soft. I know it feels good. You wouldn't feel this good to me if this didn't feel good to you."

She wasn't even listening to him; she just liked the sound of his voice, low and rumbly like that. She'd never thought about his voice, but it was nice. Deep. She liked the way his hair felt, too, loose and tickling her belly as he leaned farther over her and kissed her boob. She whimpered. She heard herself, and she sounded like a sick puppy or something, but she couldn't help it. Everything felt so scary and amazing. Her blood felt different in her veins. And what his fingers were doing . . . she flexed her hips up, wanting something more, and then she couldn't stop moving them, flexing up and down like somebody else had the controls. Somebody else did. Abel.

He groaned hard and sucked her boob deeper into his mouth—and then his finger was inside her, moving in and out of her, and she lifted her shoulders up again with a gasp. "Abel, I—" She had no clue where that sentence had been going, but it was gone now. He lifted his head and looked at her, pulling his finger out and returning to rub on her some more. Oh, God, her belly was on fire. This almost felt like pain, but pain she wanted. She wanted more of what he was doing, but she couldn't believe she could handle more. That didn't even make sense. She whimpered again, and he smiled.

"I'm gonna kiss you there now. Okay?" As he spoke, he pulled her legs wide and scooted between them. She didn't answer. She couldn't speak. But when his hands slid under her ass and lifted, she didn't stop him. And then his mouth was on her, gently.

"Oh. Oh." It was just a breath, but then every time she exhaled, it was the same. "Oh. Oh. Oh." She felt his tongue, and she reached down and grabbed handfuls of his hair. She wanted him closer; she wanted him away. This was all really confusing. He responded to her touch by being less gentle. His tongue was on her, firm and fast, and then his hands slid from her ass around to her boobs and his thumbs were on her nipples.

Something was happening. Everything felt hot and tight and intense. It hurt, maybe, but she didn't want it to stop. Abel groaned against her and sped up more, and then everything exploded hard. Her stomach clenched like a cramp and she grunted with the

strain. She felt herself curling up, all of her muscles everywhere in her body pulling inward. Her hips were moving hard against his face; she had no control of herself at all. She wanted more, she wanted more, she wanted more, she wanted—oh.

*Oh.*

*OH!*

When it was over, she relaxed like someone had flipped a switch and shut her down.

Abel kissed her belly and then pulled himself up so his face was looming over hers. She felt cross-eyed, but she could see him grinning down at her. “Ah, babe. That was beautiful.” He bent down and kissed her. His beard was wet, and when she realized why, she pulled back, shocked.

He chuckled. “Don’t be shy. You taste great. Sweet.” He kissed her again, his tongue deep in her mouth. She hadn’t caught her breath yet, but she kissed him back, feeling mellow and misty, and, in this moment, extremely fond of Abel Teller.

After a minute or two, he pulled away and looked down at her. “You ready for the main event? ‘Cuz after that, I really am. I’m so hot for you I’m about dyin’.”

Not having regained the capacity for speech yet, she nodded. With a huge, brilliant grin, Abel sat back on his heels and reached into his nightstand for a condom. He showed her the packet. “You want to put it on?” She shook her head. He winked and tore open the foil and rolled the condom on.

Hope had of course seen adult penises. She’d seen them in books, and she’s seen a few real ones she wasn’t supposed to—like her father’s, a couple of weeks ago (*jeez, don’t think about that, idiot*). She didn’t have much of an opinion about them either way, didn’t know what size they were supposed to be or anything like that. Earlier, Abel had given her a proud look, like he was expecting some kind of response from her, and she’d disappointed him. So she guessed maybe his was a nice one. Whatever. It had felt a lot different than she’d expected. Kinda silky, and really hard, almost like metal under the skin. The tip was extra silky and not as hard, and his hips jumped every time she’d touched there.

Now, he was kneeling between her legs, wearing a condom and looking down at her with an expression so intense it was a little scary. They were really going to do this. She was still breathless and tingly from her first orgasm—and that had given her a lot of insight into why people were so stupid and slutty about sex—and now she was going to let Abel Teller inside her. She wanted it.

Her life was very confusing.

Abel dropped to his hands, propped over her, and his long, thick, golden hair made a canopy around her face. “Hope, this could hurt. Maybe a lot. Just at the start, okay? You’re real wet, so I think that’ll make it easier. I’ve never been somebody’s first time before, so I don’t know for sure. But I’ve heard.”

She’d heard, too. She knew about virgin’s blood and all that. She swallowed and nodded. As soon as she did, Abel leaned to one side and grabbed her knee with his now-free hand, pulling it up to his waist. He gave her leg a pat, as if to tell her to leave it where he’d put it, and then his hand went between them, and she could feel him pushing at her, and then he was inside her, moving slowly deeper.

It did. It hurt. A lot. Like he was about ten times bigger than the space he was pushing into. It stung like crazy and pulled. This was not like the other thing. She couldn’t imagine how this was a good thing for anybody. She didn’t try to get him to stop, though. She tried to keep her face clear and not make a sound, but she must have grunted or something, because he stopped, her body aching angrily around him, and whispered, “Open your eyes, Hope.” She did, he was looking at her as if he were worried.

“Y’okay?”

She thought maybe the slow was making everything hurt more; his being still was definitely uncomfortable. Instead of answering him, she brought her other leg up along his hip and flexed her hips hard, driving him the rest of the way into her. She couldn’t hold back a pained “Ow!” But then he was in, and she’d been right. The sharp pain was ebbing away. Now she just felt sore and overfull. She still didn’t see how this was a good thing.

“Holy fuck, babe,” he gasped. “Holy fuck. You’re squeezing me so hard. Jesus. Hope.” He dropped his head to her shoulder and was still.

After a moment, he propped himself on his elbows and started moving his hips, sliding inside her, out and in. It didn’t hurt like it had at first, but she felt abraded. That was all she felt, like he was wearing a blister inside her. She didn’t stop him; it didn’t hurt so much that she couldn’t deal, and, anyway, she was starting to get used to it. It barely hurt at all anymore. He was starting to move faster, and it was fine, nothing more than a little pinch every now and then. He leaned down and kissed her then, still thrusting into her. The kiss was really nice. She liked the way his arms were shaking, and the way his tongue plunged into her mouth, echoing the rhythm of his hips.

The kiss was really good, and she put her hands on his ass to hold him close. He broke away from her mouth with a gasped, “Fuck, Hope,” and he shifted slightly to one side. She felt his hand cupping her ass and lifting her a couple of inches off the mattress.

That shift made him move inside her differently, and then she was feeling something new, something deep. It was good. He was moving really fast now, making grunting exhales every time he thrust in, and she was starting to feel the heat in her belly again.

He started to, like, chant: “Fuck, fuck, fuck, you’re so good, so sweet, oh, babe, oh, yeah, fuck, fuck . . .” Then he was quiet and pounding into her so hard she was shocked it didn’t hurt. Or, maybe it did, but in a way she didn’t mind. She wanted more again, but then he groaned, and went perfectly still, deep inside her, his face red, his eyes closed. He looked like it hurt him, too.

And then he relaxed and dropped his full weight on her. He was sweaty. And heavy. And she was sore. She felt him inside her, starting to get soft, and she felt stretched wrong. She squirmed uncomfortably, and he lifted his hips and slid out of her. That hurt a little, too.

Abel rolled to his side next to her and looked down. “Yep. A little blood. Not bad, though. You doin’ okay?”

Hope looked where he was looking and watched him pull the condom off. It was streaked with pink. When it was off, he held it up a second, and she could see the white goop filling the tip.

Whoa. She’d just had sex.

He sat up and knotted and tossed the condom, making a basket in the wastebasket next to his dresser. Then he lay back down and put his hand on her belly.

“You didn’t answer me, Hope. You doin’ okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.” She put her hand on his, and he hooked his thumb over hers.

“Did you like it?”

She thought about her answer for a minute. “I like the first thing you did. A lot. I don’t know about the rest. It hurt. But at the end, it wasn’t bad.”

He laughed. “I’m gonna choose to consider that a compliment. It won’t hurt like that next time, promise.”

Next time. Were they a couple? Weird enough that she’d had sex with Abel Teller. She tried to think what it would be like to be his girlfriend, and she had no idea. She didn’t want to think of that now, though. Her head was plenty full as it was.

He leaned over and kissed her, just a sweet brush of his lips on hers. “I really liked it. You’re so beautiful and sweet.” He brushed her hair back and nuzzled her neck, and she turned to face him, hooking her leg over his—she felt an achy pull between her legs, but ignored it. She ran her hand up his arm to trace the big tattoo there: a wide Celtic braid around his bicep, and a Celtic dragon running from his shoulder to his elbow. That and the huge patch tat on his back, identical to his father’s, were his only ink so far.

He was looking at her intently, and she met and held his eyes, not wanting to look away and seem ashamed. Because she wasn't. She felt weird and confused, but not ashamed. She felt like she should say something, but wasn't sure what.

They heard the bike at the same time, and Abel's head came up fast. He listened for one more second, then said, "That's my dad." They both jumped up.

They got dressed as fast as they could, but they heard Uncle Jax come into the house. "Not supposed to be back till tomorrow. Fuck, fuck, fuck," Abel muttered as he yanked his boots on.

Hope was calm, though she understood this was potentially really bad. Her father—what he'd do to Abel if he found out about this would be bad. Bloody. She didn't know how Uncle Jax was going to react, or if he'd tell her dad. Guess they were about to find out.

When they were put together again, they stood at the door. Abel reached out and combed his fingers through her hair. "Nothing to it but to go down there, I guess. I don't want to try to sneak out like a pussy—plus, he must have seen my bike." He took a breath. "You ready?"

"I guess." Frankly, her head was already so full with everything else going on in her life, she barely had room to stress out about this.

Abel took her hand and led her out of his room. They went downstairs and into the kitchen, where they came upon Uncle Jax pulling the fixings for a sandwich out of the refrigerator. When they came in, he turned and froze, holding a loaf of bread and a tomato. All three of them stood there, awkwardly still.

"Hi, Uncle Jax." Hope figured she might as well just go with it.

He took a beat before he answered. "Hope. You okay, darlin'?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

Abel spoke up then. "I'm just gonna take her home, Pop. I'll be back later."

"I'll be here. Come talk to me. You take care, Hope. I'll see ya." He went back to making his sandwich.

They went out to the garage. Abel hooked his finger through her belt loop and pulled her close. "Better not take the Bob now, babe. One fire at a time, I think. I'll take you back. That okay?"

She was really disappointed, but she discovered that she'd been half expecting him to renege on lending her the bike, after what they'd done upstairs. "I can still ride it, though?"

He cocked his head at her. "Yeah—I said you could. I just don't want that fight with my dad at the same time as the one I'm gonna have about us."

*Us.* "There's an us?"

"That's not what you want?" He stepped back. "I thought—I don't get you, Hope. Most girls would—after that—they'd be attached. You don't want it?"

The weird calm she'd been feeling ever since they heard Uncle Jax's bike evaporated all at once, and she just about lost it. She turned away from him and walked across the garage. She wanted distance. "I don't know. Everything's too much. I can't think straight, like, *ever*. My mom, my dad, Frank, Juice, you, what we're doing, what we did. I'm confused all the time. I don't know what I want. I don't. I want my head to be quiet for one second so I can *think*."

Abel came up behind her; she felt his hands move under her hair and rest on her shoulders. "Nothing I can say about the other stuff, but I like hangin' with you. If you like hangin' with me, why don't we leave it at that?"

It probably made her a slut, but she liked that idea. It took something out of her head and just let it be what it was. She turned and looked at him. "Okay."

"Okay." He kissed her. "Let's get you back."

## CHAPTER 14: Frank

When Frank heard the bike pulling up, she went out to the patio and waited. His timing was good—Nora was napping, and Leo was at day camp. When Happy came up to her, he leaned down to kiss her cheek. They'd been a little awkward with each other at first, but over the past couple of weeks, they had reclaimed the ease with each other they'd had for years.

He was different now, though. She was, too, she supposed, but Happy wore it hard. He walked like a man laboring under a burden. He looked sadder and older, his grief and anger etching into his face, deepening the lines and hollows of age and experience. Even his dimples had deepened into crevasses of sorrow. His natural taciturnity had hardened into near-silence.

But he still talked with her. He even still smiled, sometimes. With her kids, mostly.

She feared she was about to blow all of that right to hell, though. She'd said nothing until she knew. Now, she knew. And now they had to talk.

“Hey, little girl. Everything okay? Got me worried, needing to see me so quick.”

He'd been on a run to Tacoma with Jax and Chibs when she'd called and said she needed to see him as soon as he could. He'd called today and said they were on their way back, and he'd stop by on their way into town.

“Everything's okay. Hope, me, the kids. We're all right. I just—I need to talk to you. Let's sit and talk.” She picked up his hand and led him to the patio chairs. They sat in chairs side by side.

She'd taken some time to think before she'd called him. She knew what she wanted, what she wanted to do, how she wanted things to go. There were things they didn't know—things she didn't want to know. Getting Happy on board with all of it—that was the trick. She hated to add to his already crushing burden, but there was no other choice. Not for her.

“Still got me worried. Tell me what's up.” Happy broke into her thoughts, his dark eyes boring into her. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, his hands clasped.

Nothing to it but to do it.

“Happy.” She took a deep breath. “I'm pregnant.”

She watched the information make its way into his preoccupied head. She saw when it made impact; he completely deflated and dropped his head into his hands. She waited quietly. Finally, he raised his head. He looked . . . beaten.

“Fuck, little girl. I’m so fucking sorry. What do we do?”

She knew her answer. She was sure of it. “I’m keeping it. Juice and I weren’t using anything. It could be his. There’s a better chance that it’s his. In fact, Happy, I need you to understand this. This baby *is* Juice’s. No matter what. This doesn’t change anything between us.”

Hap shook his head. “Changes everything. You know it does.”

No. She needed him to understand. She leaned forward and put her hand on his leg. She could feel his tension thrumming under the denim. “No, Happy. It doesn’t—it doesn’t have to, if you go with what I want. I want this baby to be Juice’s. That’s what I want. The last thing you need is to add this to your worries.”

“You think I’d turn my back on my kid?” He sagged back in the chair. “Yeah, why wouldn’t you? I already did.”

There were two important topics there; Frank needed to take them one at a time. “You’re in Leo and Nora’s lives. You love them, right?” He nodded. “You’ll be in this baby’s life, too. Everything the same. Please, Happy. It’s so much better this way. Easier. And the baby is probably really Juice’s.”

“Can you find out?”

“Not for a few months. But I don’t want to know. I don’t need to know. I already *do* know. It’s Juice’s.”

“Frank . . .”

She laughed. “It sounds so strange to hear my name in your voice. Look, I’m right about this, and it’s what I want. Please, Happy. I’m not asking you to disappear. Just be who you’ve always been to me and my kids. Okay?”

He sighed and closed his eyes.

Now for the hard part. “We have to talk about Hope.”

He nodded but said nothing.

“She’s going to take it hard, Happy. I don’t even know what to tell her.”

His eyes still closed, he said, “I’ll tell her. Should be me.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t talked to her since—”

He sat up quickly and leaned toward her. “It’s me, little girl. It comes from me. I’m her father, and we’re done with this bullshit. This—this news—it comes from me. And she’s comin’ the fuck home.”

“What are you going to do, Happy? Knock her unconscious and throw her over your shoulder?”

“*FUCK!*” Happy jumped up and kicked his chair. Then he turned on it, picking it up and throwing it down, kicking what quickly became a broken pile of wood and upholstery. Frank curled herself up into her chair and waited it out.

When it was over, he stood there, panting, staring at the rubble. Frank relaxed a little. She stood up and put her hand on his arm. “Happy?”

He looked down at her, then back at the broken chair. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re not done here, though. We need to figure this out.”

He shook his head. “It’s figured. I gotta go.”

“Happy, wait.”

With a shake of his head, he lifted her chin and kissed her cheek. “I got it. I’ll see ya.” He hesitated, then put his hand on her belly. It took Frank completely by surprise, and she flinched. He met her eyes. “You take care.”

-oOo-

Nora was shrieking when Frank went back into the house, so she set her turbulent thoughts aside and collected her daughter.

“MAMA MAMA UP!” Nora shouted from her crib, her arms upraised emphatically, as soon as Frank came into her room.

“Okay, NoNo, okay.” She picked her up and changed her. “You want to play blocks?”

“NO! ZOO!” She roared like a lion.

“You got it.” Frank put her daughter on her feet and took her hand. They went out to the living room, and she brought out two big baskets full of plastic animals. Nora ran to them and dumped the baskets over, grabbing two elephants and charging them around the floor making trumpeting noises. As long as Frank was good with the noise and willing to offer up an occasional animal noise or two of her own, “Zoo” was good to keep Nora occupied for up to an hour. Frank sat on the floor, her back against the sofa, and thought.

Happy was wrong—dangerously wrong—if he thought he could force Hope to do anything. He knew it, too. If he weren't collapsing under the weight of his grief, guilt, rage, and self-loathing, he would know how to talk to her. He'd always known how to talk to her. But now, no. Every day that Hope avoided him, every day that he lived in that house alone, he was losing more and more balance. She'd seen the deterioration happening, the hardening. He was becoming what he feared he would become.

She was afraid this new thing might be the thing that was finally too much for him.

Maybe she'd been wrong to tell him he wasn't the father, regardless of genetics. But she'd had time to think, time he hadn't had yet, and she knew it was the right thing. It had to be. She wanted this baby to be her and Juice. She needed that to be true. She couldn't even deal with the thought that it was not. That need trumped every other concern.

But there were lots of other concerns.

Happy had been like a father to her. He was a grandfather to her children. She didn't regret what had happened between them, even now she didn't regret it, but their relationship would not translate to romance. Even that night, it hadn't been romance. It hadn't even been sex. It had been grief and comfort. She couldn't get her head around what their relationship would be if he were the father of her child. That leap was far beyond her cognitive ability.

She knew the Sons wouldn't react well. Now, pregnant with Juice's child, she'd be warmly cared for by his brothers, still in the bosom of the club. Pregnant by Happy, so soon after Juice's death? They'd take care of her, but all those relationships which had become so important to her over the years, they'd all be compromised. She would bear the brunt of their censure more than Happy would.

No, her call was absolutely the right one. She needed to help Happy see that. She shouldn't have let him leave until she was sure he saw. The way he left, he might be only more broken.

And what was he planning to say to Hope? How was he planning to bring her home? How was he planning to get her to talk to him at all? She was so like him. Confronted, Hope fought. Any attempt to force her brought ferocious resistance. Happy understood that. Normally, she would trust him to know what to do, but not now.

Maybe she should talk to Hope first.

-oOo-

Later that afternoon, Frank pulled up the driveway, coming home from picking Leo up at camp. Leo was keeping Nora occupied in the backseat, teaching her silly songs he was making up on the fly. He was a good brother. Frank had been driving on autopilot,

distracted and blue. She'd loved her life. Now everything was upside down, and she had to figure out how to right it on her own.

There was an unfamiliar black Audi coupe parked to the side of the driveway. Suspicious, Frank stopped and put her SUV into reverse. There was a loaded gun in the glove box, but it was locked. Besides, Frank had never gotten any good at shooting, and her children were in the car. She was about to back out and call for help from the road, when the driver's door of the little coupe opened, and Desi, her oldest, dearest friend, stepped out.

Jesus. Desi. Frank hadn't talked to her in . . . more than a month. She hadn't even thought yet to tell her about Juice. What was she doing here? Unannounced? From fucking France?

Frank parked and jumped down. She practically needed a ladder, or a parachute, to get out of that fucking yacht, but as soon as he'd known she was pregnant with Leo, Juice had bought her first huge SUV and thrown a macho fit about how his child wasn't going to be riding around in the death trap she liked to drive. At the time, said "death trap" had been an awesome, orange 1980 Volkswagen Thing. She'd caved, thinking his protective father thing was seriously adorable, and now she was on her third monster.

Desi met her in front of the truck and pulled her into a tight hug. "Ah, sweets. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you let me know? I would've been here."

"I'm sorry, I just—everything's been weird." The truth was, Frank was appalled that she hadn't thought to call Desi.

"Don't be sorry. I just wish I could have been here for you." She put her hand on Frank's cheek.

"You are now. How—how did you know?"

"Tig. He called me."

To say that was a shock would be an understatement. Frank had no idea they'd had any contact in fifteen years. "You talk to Tig?"

"Since I was here when Leo was born. We . . . got some closure. We've talked from time to time since."

"Wow. I had no idea."

Desi shrugged. "It's private, sweets."

Leo had climbed down and come up to them, standing shyly behind Frank. Nora was screaming for freedom from her car seat. Her daze even deeper than it had been when she'd pulled up, Frank went around to release her daughter. Hefting Nora on her hip, she

reached into the front passenger seat and grabbed the bag from the China Hut. “Well, we’re having Chinese for dinner, so come on in.”

Once in the kitchen, Frank put Nora in her high chair and chopped up a couple of eggrolls for her, while Desi got out plates and poured milk for Leo and Nora and wine for her and Frank. Then they sat down to a dinner of fried rice, crab Rangoon, and sweet and sour shrimp. Frank was going to have to figure out how to feed her kids now. She’d never learned to cook; Juice had been the family chef, and he’d been good at it. Whenever he was away, they’d eaten takeout or sandwiches. Or ramen—Leo shared his mother’s love of Asian noodles and MSG. But now Juice would always be away, and Frank couldn’t let her kids live on PBJs and ramen.

They didn’t talk much during dinner. Desi tried to get Leo to tell her what he was up to, but he was shy and hardly knew her at all, except for the occasional stilted video chat. He eyed her suspiciously as he snagged shrimps with his chopsticks. Nora shrieked for more egg roll and pounded her fists on her tray, making the pieces bounce around. Frank pushed her food around and pretended to sip at her wine. Desi didn’t seem to notice, and at her first opportunity, Frank dumped her glass in the sink.

After dinner, they all sat together and watched *Monsters University*, an old Pixar movie. Nora fell asleep in Frank’s lap. Afterwards, forgoing baths for the night, Frank put her kids to bed, tucking a zonked Nora into her crib, then crossing the hall to read a chapter from *The Hobbit* to Leo.

When she came back to the living room, Desi had cleaned up all the toys and turned the television off. She was sitting on the sofa, waiting for her. The years had been kind to Desi, who was in her early 60s now. She was softer, and slightly fuller-figured, and she’d let her hair go mostly natural—it was a lovely pearl grey, though she kept a nostalgic swoop of burgundy in the front, and still maintained a short, spiky punk style. Her skin was firm, and her prodigious ink still looked great. The woman had always taken care of herself.

They’d always stayed in steady contact, their friendship never waning, but Frank had only seen Desi in person three times, including now, over the past fifteen years: when Juice and Frank had spent a week in Paris with her about ten years ago, and when Desi had come to the States after Leo was born and spent a couple weeks helping Frank get her maternal bearings. That had been amusing, actually. Desi and babies—not a great combination. But it had been wonderful to have her around for a worldly perspective on the breastmilk/babypoop cycle that had suddenly become Frank’s life.

And apparently, somewhere in there, she and Tig had gotten “closure,” eight years after the explosion of their fiery romance. Frank must have been seriously subject to postpartum brain, because she’d had no idea at all.

She'd poured more wine for both of them and set the glasses on the cocktail table. Frank sat next to her on the couch. When Desi handed her a glass, eyebrow raised, Frank knew the stalling was over.

"Can't drink that, Des. You go ahead."

Desi nodded knowingly. "I saw you dump the glass earlier. Somethin' you want to tell me, sweets?"

"Seems like you know."

"How far along?" She took a big swallow of her own wine.

"Few weeks."

"Jesus, Frank. I don't know whether to feel a little happier or a lot sadder for you. Is it a good thing?"

Even Frank could hear the sadness in her laugh. "I hope so. It's scary."

"I'm sure it is. You planning to keep it?"

She could only nod.

"I understand. A new little bit of Juice—that's a good thing, right?"

A part of her wanted to tell Desi everything. She needed to unload all of her fear and sorrow somewhere. She'd tried to be strong for Happy—she would continue to be strong for him—but the conflict she felt about this baby was tearing her up. The thought that she could be carrying a child that was not Juice's, that she could have gotten pregnant *on the night of her husband's funeral*, made her want to die. But the thought that before he'd gotten himself killed he'd left something of himself behind in her—that was a beautiful, poignant thought that made her feel like his very hand was on her, touching her, loving her. She hoped it was that. It had to be that. He was with her, inside her. He had to be.

This child was his. It was his. She could tell no one anything else. No one. This secret Happy and she kept to themselves. And Hope. Oh, sweet Hope. What this would do to her.

Without any warning at all, the tears were on her. Desi embraced her, cradling her head on her shoulder. "Oh, sweetheart. What can I do? I'm here as long as you want me. Just tell me what I can do, and I'll do it."

Frank shook her head, nestled against her best friend's neck. There was nothing. She was alone.

## CHAPTER 15: Hope

Abel didn't take her straight back to Frank's. Or to her house. Hope was confused. She felt displaced. Her little outburst in the garage had loosened something in her head, and now it was rattling around unnervingly. She didn't belong at Frank's. She didn't belong with her dad. That left her nowhere to be.

When, on impulse, she'd asked Abel to just ride somewhere, anywhere, he'd sent a text—she figured it was to his dad—and had taken her halfway to Yosemite. The curving country highway had been fairly empty, and they'd had a great ride. He'd finally pulled in at a roadside diner in some small town nestled into the pines and bought her dinner.

They'd chatted aimlessly as they ate. About halfway through the meal, Hope realized she was kinda on her first date. She looked up from her fries to see Abel watching her; when her eyes met his, he smiled and looked away, as if he were embarrassed to have been caught out. He had a great smile; it made her want to kiss him. She was liking him a lot at that moment. All day, actually. In fact, it had been a while since she'd felt negatively toward him.

It was dark, and at this elevation it was chilly, even in July. Hope, in a t-shirt and light leather jacket, wasn't dressed for a ride in 50-degree temperatures. She was shivering simply standing in the parking lot. There was a souvenir shop next to the diner; Abel went in and bought her a green hoodie with pine trees silkscreened on it.

There was a little park behind the diner and souvenir shop, and Abel took Hope's hand and walked her back into the trees until they came upon a picnic table. He sat on the table, his feet on the bench, and pulled her to sit next to him. He kissed her, and she sought out his tongue with hers.

Soon enough, she was on her back on the table, and Abel was on top of her, kissing her deeply, heavily, his hands under her hoodie and t-shirt. Her hands were under his jacket and kutte, and she was kissing him back with vigor. She was still sore, so she didn't think she wanted to do more, but she understood much better what her body was doing and feeling, and in the understanding found the experience all the more powerful. If they went on like that much longer, she wouldn't care about being sore.

Abel lifted away from her a bit and looked into her eyes; his hair, which she'd pulled loose from its band, sheltered their faces. "I'm going to get lit up for you again, taking you so far from home, keeping you out. What is it about you makes me so stupid?" His voice was low and made Hope's belly twitch.

She smiled, unable to pass up the chance for a little dig, even with his hand on her boob, his thumb and finger pinching softly at her nipple through the thin, silky fabric of her bra. "You sure it's me making you stupid?"

He gave her nipple a harder pinch, making her gasp and arch toward him. Smiling, he warned, “You oughta be careful, girl. Might find yourself stranded out here in the sticks.”

She shifted under him, moving her legs so that she could circle his hips with them. He groaned and closed his eyes when her crotch pressed to his. “Damn, babe. I want to be inside you again.” He bent his head to hers and claimed her lips again in a kiss that left her head swimming.

He pulled back, panting. “Okay, gotta stop. I’m not gonna fuck you right here.” He stopped, looked away, obviously thinking. “Unless you want to get one of those motel rooms ‘cross the way, stay the night?”

Hope looked past him at the starlit sky. The thought of sleeping with Abel, against his strong, firm body, was appealing. The thought of staying in a motel, where everybody belonged because they didn’t belong, was appealing. More appealing than the guest room at Frank’s house, or returning in darkness to her parents’ house, where who knew what her father was doing. Probably drinking in the dark.

“Hope? You wanna?”

Reluctantly, she shook her head. “If I’m not at Frank’s tonight, there’ll be Sons from three charters hunting us down before dawn. Plus, I have to work tomorrow.”

He rolled to his side and propped his head on his hand. “You ever going back to your house? Your dad’s been there a couple weeks now.”

“I don’t know. I guess, someday.”

“Babe, what happened? You’re avoiding your dad, everybody knows it. He’s a fuckin’ bear to be around—and he ain’t that friendly to start. Nobody knows why. Is it ‘cuz he split? ‘Cuz it looked like you made up over that.”

She’d never had a truly serious conversation with Abel. Never. But he was asking her something serious and personal, and she didn’t know what to say—whether to blow him off, tell him off, or talk to him. She had no one to talk to, and she was practically vibrating with the need to bleed her mental line a little. She needed to talk to someone she could trust. That wasn’t Abel. Was it?

“What do you want with me?”

He sat up abruptly at the question. “For real? That the third time *today* you’ve asked me a question like that. What answer is it you want?”

She sat up, too. “I want to understand. I’m tired of being confused about everything.”

He put his hand on her face, tracing her cheekbone with his thumb. It felt good. Calming. “I thought we agreed we like hangin’ together.”

Yeah, they had agreed that. It was the right call. She couldn’t trust him. It was for the best—the only person she’d ever trusted who hadn’t let her down was dead. Thinking about her mom, she realized what a huge mistake it would be ever to tell *anyone* about her dad and Frank. She couldn’t do that to her mom. She never wanted anyone to know what her dad had done to her mom. It was bad enough that she had to live with it. She couldn’t deal if everybody knew. That secret had to die.

She turned her face into his hand, and he pulled her close and pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek. His lips still on her skin, he said, “I do like you, Hope. A lot.”

“We should head back.”

As she started to swing down from the picnic table, Abel grabbed her arm. “You never answered my question—what’s up with you and your dad?”

“Just father-daughter stuff. You wouldn’t understand.”

It was past midnight when Abel dropped her off at Frank’s. There was a fancy sports car parked in the driveway. Hope didn’t recognize it. Abel wanted to come in with her and make sure everything was okay, but she didn’t want the awkwardness if Frank was still up, so she made him leave. He insisted that she text him when she was in the house and all was clear. She did—Frank’s friend, Desi, was sleeping on the living room sofa—and she could hear his bike when it pulled away. He’d only gone as far as the road to wait for her text.

Were they becoming a couple after all? That thought freaked her out. But it was certainly true that Abel was the only adult person she wanted to be around right now.

Her brain hurt all the time.

Before she slept, she sat in the middle of the bed, holding the letter from her mom, still sealed in its envelope. It had become a nightly ritual. She’d sit in bed, holding the envelope, trying to imagine what her mother’s dying words would be. She hadn’t gotten to say goodbye. She’d seen her mother only in brief snatches of time over the last week of her life; she’d been sleeping, or puking, almost all the time. She must have written this letter before then. When had she known the end was close enough to write a letter? Why hadn’t she left it in plain sight? There had been a few desolate days between her death and her burial. She thought she would have been able to open the letter then.

She could not do it now.

She put the letter back in the nightstand and turned off the light.

-oOo-

She dreamt about her mom all night and woke before dawn. The dreams had been broken and diffuse but not unhappy, just palimpsests of memories and wishes, leaving a nostalgic ache of loss behind. Hope turned on the light and sat up, disoriented, clinging to the wisps of dream escaping as her consciousness sharpened.

She pulled her mother's letter out of the nightstand. Taking a breath and holding it, she eased the seal open. She pulled out three sheets of plain white paper and, unfolding them, read her mother's last words to her.

*My Hope,*

*I'm not sure how to start this. It's probably weird to get a letter from me at this point. But I wanted to say something to you, my beautiful, miraculous child.*

*I can't tell you how proud I am of you. So I won't. Trust me, it's a lot. But I want to tell you what I see when I look at my daughter:*

*I see a girl who's so smart she intimidates me a little. You can do anything you want, baby. Decide what it is and do it. Don't let people tell you no.*

*I see a girl who doesn't let people tell her no (see how funny I am?). It's a rare thing to be willing to fail, to be willing to keep failing until you succeed. With that willingness, the world has few limits for you. People who let others tell them no lack that resolve.*

*I see a girl who despises injustice and meanness. I know I'm frustrated with all of your fighting in school, but I'm also proud. You stand up for people. You call out unfairness and unkindness. You don't sit by when people are hurt. You make me proud.*

*I see a girl who doesn't think like most people, who never has. That's going to make some things hard for you, Hope. You already know that. But it can also make things fascinating. Don't conform. Be who you are. Who you are is magnificent. Miraculous.*

*Now, I'm thinking that things are pretty hard for you right now. I'm so sorry I couldn't stay and finish my job getting you grown. But I know you're surrounded by love and support, and I know you're a strong and brave young woman. I know you'll do me proud. You always have.*

*I hate to ask this of you now, but I'm going to. I trust you to be strong enough to understand. I'm going to ask you to give your dad some space to screw up. I think he might screw up for awhile. (If he doesn't, boy am I embarrassed!)*

*I know you know this, but I'm going to say it anyway. Your dad and I love each other a whole big lot. It's beautiful and intense. I want you to have our kind of love someday. But when I'm gone, I think your dad might have some trouble. He doesn't think he's as good*

*as we know he is. He's afraid he won't be able to be a good dad without me. He doesn't think he's a good man without me. He's told me as much. I know he will be. I've told him as much. But he's stubborn, especially when he's sad.*

*Your dad told me that you and he had a talk about Katherine. You and I never got around to having that talk ourselves. Maybe that's for the best. But I don't know if your dad told you this part, and I want to make sure you know: we named you Hope because it's what you were to us. It was your dad's idea. One of his best. You were hope to us when we found out we were having you, and you've been hope to us every day since. In so many ways, you are the love your dad and I have for each other.*

*Your dad saved me that day. His love for me saved me. That's the kind of power his love has. He has that kind of love for you, too. I want you to remember that. I have a feeling you might need to remember it. Because he doesn't think his love is strong enough.*

*I know it is. I'm telling you it is. His love is mighty, and he loves you. But he may need some saving himself now.*

*If he needs to be forgiven, I'm asking you to do that. For me. For yourself. And for him. My family.*

*I love you, my Hope. So much. I wish I could see you grow up into the brilliant woman you'll become. Maybe I'm somewhere that I can watch. Either way, know that you are my dream fulfilled.*

*Be strong. Be true. Be kind. In other words, be who you are.*

*I love you, baby.*

*Mom*

When she was done, Hope folded it neatly and slid it back into its envelope. She sat quietly, thinking, as the sun came up. She didn't cry. The ache was too big for tears.

-oOo-

After she got up, showered, and got dressed, she carefully folded the envelope in half and slid it into a back pocket of her jeans. She hated to fold it, but she wanted it with her. She heard Frank and the kids moving around, so she went out to get breakfast started.

Desi was already up and brewing coffee. Hope felt awkward coming into the kitchen. She knew who Desi was, but that didn't really make her any less of a stranger.

Desi turned as Hope came in and said, "Hi, Hope. I don't know if you remember me—I'm Desi."

Exactly. A stranger. Hope wasn't really in the mood "I know. Hi." She got out the makings for eggs and sausage. There was a cantaloupe on the counter, so she pulled a knife from the block—freezing when she realized it was the knife she'd found bloody in the sink the morning after Juice's funeral, after—she slid it back in its slot and selected another.

"Anything I can do to help, sweetheart?" Desi was still standing at the coffeemaker.

"Do you cook?" Might as well find some way to minimize the awkwardness.

Desi nodded. "Indeed I do. Looks like, what omelet and sausage?"

"Just scrambled eggs, with sausage crumbles and some cheese mixed in. The kids want their eggs messy—that's what Leo calls them."

"I can do that. Messy eggs coming up." They worked together making breakfast. It was okay. Desi didn't try to chat; they just worked side by side.

When Frank came in with the kids, breakfast was ready. As they were eating, Desi looked at Frank. "While I'm here, sweets, you're getting some long-overdue cooking lessons."

Frank laughed gloomily. "Okay. I know." She turned to Hope. "Maybe you could help, too? You're a great cook, kiddo."

Hope smiled, but a little grudgingly. She liked that Frank didn't cook. It gave Hope a reason to be here. "Sure, I can teach you what I know. My mom taught me." Frank met her eyes and smiled.

*Forgive.* She'd found it a lot harder not to blame Frank, too, for what had happened since she knew that Frank wasn't sorry about it. At least her dad was sorry it happened. If she was going to forgive her dad, though, she had to forgive the whole thing. She didn't know whether she could. She had to think some more.

As they were cleaning up, Desi asked, "Frank said you might need a ride into town for work—I'm happy to take you."

When Frank had been going into the shop herself, Hope had simply gone in with her. But she didn't know when or if Frank would be doing hours on the floor again, and not having her own transportation was really becoming a problem for Hope. Kevin had been picking her up in the club van, but that was in use otherwise today. Thankfully, she had made other arrangements. "That's okay. I have a ride. Abel's picking me up."

Frank looked up at that, but didn't say anything. As Hope headed out of the kitchen to get her things together, though, Frank stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Hey, when you get back tonight, can we sit down and talk for a while?"

Hope shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

-oOo-

Work was fine. It was good actually. Abel had dropped her off with a quick kiss—the more she thought of it, the more she was understanding that he was acting like a boyfriend—and headed to the garage. When she’d asked if he’d had trouble with his dad, he’d only shrugged and handed her the helmet.

She opened on her own and enjoyed the quiet. She’d been back to work less than a week after Juice’s funeral, as soon as it looked like Frank could be trusted to be alone with the kids all day without drifting back into another fog. Hope was glad to have something to do and be away from that house and all the confusion. This was the first time in her life she’d ever felt the need to escape her *family*.

Jerry came in right after lunch. She got along fine with Jerry—though, since he was the senior employee, having been around for, like, fifteen years, Frank had left a lot to him these past weeks, and now he was starting to act like he thought he was the boss. He wasn’t. Hope wasn’t going to put up with that. Already this morning, they’d squabbled over the hours he was scheduling her for and whether or not she’d clocked in appropriately. She had. He was going to be getting a fist in his gut pretty soon.

It was release day, so the shop was busy from just before noon on. Time flew. Hope barely had a moment to think about anything sad. It was nice. Every now and then, she’d put her hand in her back pocket and feel her mom’s letter. She read it a second time during her lunch break. There was a lot of thinking Hope needed to do about that.

As her workday was winding down, Abel called and asked if she needed a ride back. She did. But by the time he was there to pick her up, she’d had another idea. As she strapped on the helmet, she asked, “Where are you coming from?”

“Clubhouse. Why?”

“Was my dad there?” Like every other day since Juice’s funeral, her father had called her several times. She hadn’t listened to the messages yet, though. She usually did that all in a group, when she was feeling like she could deal. Actually, she usually only listened to the first couple of seconds of any message. Once she got a sense that it was more of him telling her he was sorry and wanted to see her, she deleted.

“Yeah. Pretty deep in a bottle. Again I ask: why?”

“Got a favor. Would you let me ride that red bike to my house?”

For a long, uncomfortable stretch, Abel just stared. “You are *trying* to get me killed. You want to ride it *to your house*?”

“You said my dad was at the clubhouse. Sounds like he’ll be too messed up to ride, right?”

“Shit, babe. Why don’t I just take you to your house? I can do that.”

No. She didn’t know exactly why, but she needed to be there on her own power. She had not stepped foot in that house in four months, not since the day they’d put her mother in the ground. She had to be able to move freely. She didn’t understand it, but she knew it was true. She didn’t know how to explain it to Abel, though. So she just stood there, looking at him, not sure what to say, but not willing to back down.

He caved. “Fuck. I can’t believe this. Okay. Let’s go.”

When they got to his parents’ place and he’d rolled the Bob out to the driveway for her, she kissed him and said, “Thanks. You don’t have to go with me. It’s okay.”

“You’ve been out in traffic *one* time. Yesterday. I’m not letting you go off on your own. Let’s just do this, okay? Before my brain comes back from wherever the fuck it went?”

When they approached her house, Hope slowed up a lot. Her stomach was twitching and rolling like crazy. They parked on the driveway, and she simply sat, staring at the front door. She was terrified to go in there. She wasn’t even sure why she’d decided that now was the time to do it.

Abel walked up to her, already rid of his helmet. “Hey, you sure about this?”

She shook her head and dismounted. “You don’t have to stay. I got here safe.” She wanted him to stay, though. She didn’t want to be in there on her own. It’s not like she was afraid of anything specific. But she felt small and weak and lonely. She took her helmet off and shook her hair out.

Abel chuckled and twirled a lock of her hair in his fingers. He’d taken his gloves off, too. “I want to stay.” He took her hand.

Going into the house was hard, but she did it. The house was dim and gloomy, all the curtains drawn; that was more than she could deal with, so she turned lights on as they moved through. The house was perfectly clean, nothing out of place. Except in the kitchen, where there was a cluster of empty Jack Daniels bottles next to the sink—sixteen of them in all, grouped neatly in four rows of four.

It had been eighteen days since Juice’s funeral. He’d been gone four days on a run to Tacoma. Wow. Her dad was drinking more than she even knew.

That made her sad. Maybe her mom was right. Maybe it was time to talk to him. She loved him. She wanted him to be okay. She just didn’t know how to understand everything.

Abel whistled quietly behind her. “Why’s he saving them?”

Hope got pissed right away. Suddenly, she hated that Abel was here, seeing this private thing of her dad’s. She turned sharply toward him and hit him in the chest with her flat hand. “Mind your own business.”

She saw the hurt on his face, but he covered it quickly. “Hey—chill. Didn’t mean anything.” She was still pissed. She knew she wasn’t being fair, but her head was screaming loud and was even more confused. Her mom wanted her to save her dad. How was she supposed to do that? Why would she even ask such a thing? *She* was the kid. *He* was supposed to take care of *her*. But he bailed. He stayed away. And then he came back to make *Frank* feel better.

No. He was hurting. She knew he was. She didn’t need a tavern’s worth of empty whiskey bottles to know he was broken. She didn’t need Frank or even her mom to tell her. She knew.

But she was hurting, too. And he kept making it worse.

Abel put his hand on her arm, and she jumped. He dropped his hand. “You want me to go?”

Hope was torn. He was in the middle of an incredibly private moment, and she felt his presence like an ache. She didn’t want him to see her family like this. But she didn’t want to be here alone. She didn’t even know why she was here. Not for her dad—she’d known he wouldn’t be here. It had given her some relief to know that. “No. I don’t want to be here alone.”

“Why are we here, Hope?”

“I don’t know!” She struck out at him again, slamming him in the chest with both hands. Before she could drop them, though, he grabbed her wrists. He pulled her close and kissed her, more roughly than ever before. His beard abraded her lips. He pushed her against the refrigerator and leaned against her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth over and over and his hands grabbing her ass.

He’d completely derailed her. She was stunned at first, and then she was into it, looping her arms around his neck and kissing him back. When he pulled away, they were both breathless.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, her voice dazed.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Tired of getting hit, I guess. It was that or hit you back.”

She laughed a little. “Good choice.”

He brushed her nose with his. “I won’t ask any more questions. I’ll just follow your lead. But I won’t leave you here on your own.”

The way he was looking at her made her chest feel weird. Sometimes he really unsettled her, being so nice. When he said exactly the right thing. Like now. She nodded and pushed away from the fridge. He backed off and gave her some space.

She didn’t know what her lead was, though. She wandered through the all the rooms in the house. Everything felt empty and strange. Her room was mostly devoid of her; all of her things were at Frank’s. Her dad’s den was locked, as it had been her entire life. She’d never crossed the threshold into that room. Her parents’ bed was partially unmade—the only thing besides the whiskey bottles that was out of place in the house. The spread was up, but the pillows on her mom’s side of the bed were on top of it, lined end to end down that side of the bed. She considered that for a minute, thinking it was weird.

And then she understood. It made perfect sense. And she felt so sad for her father it almost took her legs out from under her. She took an unsteady step to catch herself, and Abel’s hand was around her arm. She had to get him out of here. He had no business in this room, this house. What had she been thinking? She turned and pushed at him, and he walked backward until they were in the hallway. Feeling like she couldn’t breathe, she maneuvered past him in the narrow space and ran to the back door.

Once she was in the back yard, she folded over, her hands on her knees. She heard Abel come up to her. He didn’t touch her, but then he squatted down at her side. “Hope? Maybe I should get you out of here.”

She stood straight and pulled herself together. She was looking at her mom’s music room. It was the only room she hadn’t been in. Without answering Abel, she took her keys out and unlocked the door.

The pale light of late afternoon wasn’t doing much to illuminate the room, so Hope turned on the overhead lights. The first thing she noticed was the empty stand where her mom’s Martin should have been. It was the only thing missing, so she figured her dad must have done something with it. Hopefully nothing bad. Hope didn’t want anything to happen to that guitar. Her mom had taught her how to play on it. She’d never gotten very good, nothing like her mom, but it had been fun to learn with her.

She sat down on the old sofa and took in the sadness of the room. Nowhere else in the world was her mom more present, and more absent, than here. This was her space, where she worked, where she played, where she hid when she wanted to be alone for awhile.

Hope leaned forward and checked to make sure the letter was in her back pocket. “She left me a letter. I read it this morning.”

Abel sat next to her. “Why’d you wait so long?”

“I didn’t know about it until a couple of weeks ago. And then, I don’t know. Scared me, I guess.”

“What did she say?”

But Hope shook her head. That was private. That was for no one but her. Abel didn’t press her, for which she was grateful. Her hands were slack in her lap, and he picked one up. She didn’t know why that moved her so much. It wasn’t like he’d never held her hand before, but her heart cramped anyway, and then she was crying. She hated to cry. She especially hated to cry with an audience. She hated most of all that she kept doing it in front of him. But she couldn’t stop.

She could see that he didn’t know what to do with her, and that made her cry even harder. Finally, he put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her to his chest. She almost resisted—she really hated crying in front of people—but she wanted to lean on his chest, so she let him bring her close to do exactly that. She got as close as she could, inside his kutte, tucked against his neck. He was warm and smelled nice. He had an arm around her shoulders, that hand squeezing possessively, and his other hand rubbing circles on her back. It was soothing. Her tears abated. But she didn’t want to pull away from him.

Scooting even closer, she pressed her lips to his neck, opening her mouth a little so she could taste him. He twitched at the contact, and his hand stilled on her back. He brought it to her face and pulled her back, his eyes on hers. He brushed her cheeks dry. Then he kissed her.

And that was exactly what she needed. She wasn’t even sure what happened in her head right then, but she knew that was what she needed. She kissed him back hard, feeling frantic. She shoved her hands under his clothes until they were on the bare skin of his torso, and then she wrapped him up as tightly in her arms as she could, grazing her fingernails over his skin as she did, making him grunt in her mouth.

As if she’d tripped a switch in him, he was suddenly as intense as she was, grabbing her leg and yanking her to lie under him on the couch. His hands and mouth were everywhere, kissing her neck, pushing up her clothes, suckling her breast, shoving into her jeans and between her legs.

She was yanking at his clothes, too. She wanted to feel his skin on hers again. She wanted him to make her feel the way he did in his bedroom. They were in her mother’s music room; she shouldn’t want it here, but she didn’t care. She needed him to make her feel good. She needed him to make her head stop, just for a little while.

And then she froze. Abel froze, too, looking down at her, panting. His hair loose and glorious. “Hope?”

She didn't answer. She had to think for a minute. She thought maybe she understood what happened between her dad and Frank, what Frank had meant. This wasn't the same, because it *was* sex—sex with the man she was with, with Abel—that Hope wanted. It was Abel she could feel swollen against her thigh, Abel's hand warm on the skin of her belly. But she now understood a need that was more than him.

“Hope? You want to stop, babe?” He sounded bummed. She refocused and shook her head.

“No. I want you to do what you did before.”

His smile was sweet. “You got it. Can I take your clothes off this time?” She nodded.

He did, slowly and sweetly, kissing her skin as he bared it. His lips and tongue left hot trails, and his beard tickled and scratched gently. Then he stood and stripped himself, stopping to turn off the overhead lights in favor of a lamp on her mother's desk. He snagged a condom out of his jeans with a wink.

“Do you always have a condom with you?”

He grinned. “Yeah. A couple.”

She wondered if he was having sex with other girls now. She wasn't sure it mattered. She thought maybe it did, but that needed some consideration, and she didn't want to be thinking at all right now, as Abel settled himself between her bare thighs and put his mouth on her. She fed her fingers through his silky hair and held him close.

She knew better what to expect this time, so she was able to pay more attention to how her body reacted. It felt *so* good—his tongue touching her in a way that made it impossible to be still or quiet. Every time she whimpered or moaned, he made a sound, too, and his hands clenched her hips a little tighter. She was climbing again, the muscles in her body feeling hot and tight, her hips thrusting against his face of their own volition, and then he pulled away, just as she was starting to feel a little dizzy, her joints tingling. He came up on his knees and grabbed the condom, rolling it on quickly. Then he was looming over her again, hooking her leg up with one arm and holding himself steady with the other hand.

And then he was inside her, before she'd had an orgasm from his mouth. She hadn't expected that. Neither had she expected the way it would feel this time to have him inside her. There was a little residual soreness, but not much. Instead, it felt amazing. She was climbing again, overcome by the pleasure of his body moving inside her, and over her, his hair grazing her arms and chest, his beard on her cheek, the sounds of his own pleasure sweet in her ear.

She was moaning and moaning. The noise she was making embarrassed her, and she tried to stop, but she couldn't. And then she didn't care. She was almost insensible, feeling

only what he was doing to her body. He was good at this. He must be good at this. She couldn't think how it would be better.

“God, Hope. You feel so good. It's crazy how good this is. I love being with you like this, it's so—”

His words were cut off abruptly as he was yanked away from her, out of her. He yelled in pain and surprise, and Hope opened her eyes to see her father, rage blazing across his face, holding Abel by his hair and by an arm wrenched behind his back. And then they were gone; her father had thrown him, naked, through the door into the back yard.

## CHAPTER 16: Happy

Happy left Frank's and rode home. He was exhausted. Ten hours on a bike was a long haul for his old bones, and they'd gotten an early start—before dawn and a day earlier than planned, so with less rest—because he was worried that something had happened with Hope or Frank.

Something had definitely happened.

He sat in the living room with Vivian's laptop and his Jack. For a long time, until it was full dark, he wasn't sure he had any thoughts at all. When he came around, it was dark, and the bottle was half empty.

Frank wanted the baby to be Juice's, and Hap understood. Even dead, Juice was a better father than he was. But Hap knew it wasn't true. Didn't know why he knew, but in his gut he knew that kid was his. He'd knocked up a girl he thought of as a daughter, whose children called him Grandpa. He'd done it on the night they'd buried her old man, his brother. He'd betrayed his daughter and the memory of his wife to do it.

Vivian was wrong. He was the worst kind of man.

He opened her laptop. Besides the videos she'd made for him and Hope, there was a folder of videos of Hope's childhood. Another folder held recordings of her music. Pep had shown him how to access the files.

First, though, he watched the video she'd made for Hope. She'd asked him to watch it before he told her about it. She must have made it at the same time she made the one for him—same background, same clothes, same everything. Vivian and her Martin.

“Hey, baby. You doin' okay? I know this is all real hard. I wish you didn't have to go through it. You're too young to deal with shit like this. But you're strong, baby. You're gonna be okay. I know it. Trust me—I know what I'm talking about. Everything's gonna turn out okay.

“I was working on getting things organized so you and your dad could find my music and stuff, and I remembered that there was one song I never recorded. I never meant to record it, because I wanted it to be just for us, only live, only when we were together—and then, maybe someday, it would be the same for you and your kids. But it looks like I'm not gonna be able to sing it with you anymore. I thought maybe you'd like it if I made it so we could. I wrote it for you. It's your song, baby. Only yours.

“If this is too hard, or you just want your memories of us really singing together, and this would ruin it, you turn this off right now, baby. Don't feel like you have to watch for me. I don't want to make things harder. But I'm gonna sing for you now, if you want to listen.”

Hap already knew what he would hear when she started to strum, but knowing didn't ease the achy shock in his heart. It was the song he knew best; the lullaby she'd written when they were expecting Hope. She'd sung it over and over, rocking Hope to sleep when she was tiny, or lying in bed after a story when she was a bit older. Eventually, Hope began to sing along. It was something they'd always shared, even as Hope became a teen. Sometimes, when they were working together in the kitchen or garden, or just sitting together reading, one would start, and the other would pick up before the end of the first line. Hope had a higher singing voice than her mother's, and they'd made a sweet harmony. Hap had seen them resolve fights that way, ending a period of stony silence when one of them started singing that song. His girls singing was high among his favorite memories.

On the video, Vivian began to sing.

*They say it's a thing with feathers,  
Singing a wordless song.  
A tiny bird against the wind  
Fighting storms all alone.*

*They call it dawn after darkest night  
Chasing shadows from your way.  
A gleaming star to light you home  
Turning night into the day.*

*They say it springs eternal  
Living in every breast.  
A beating heart that courses life  
Defying every test.*

*They say it rises from the ashes  
Eating the fire of its death.  
Fiercer now, a wiser friend  
Courage on its breath.*

*You, my love, are Hope to me.  
The Phoenix rising strong.  
You, my child, are Hope to me.  
My life, my love, my song.*

She was crying and struggling by the end, but it was beautiful. She strummed to fade the song out. Then, she looked up at the camera. She'd been calmer in her video to Hap. He understood why this one was harder. The pain on his wife's face as she said goodbye to their daughter was almost more than he could bear. He bore it, though, for her.

"Oh, my baby. My girl. You are going to be okay, Hope. You are. I know it, because I know you're strong and determined. You're a fighter. I wish I had more time to help you

through the next years—being a young woman ain't easy. But I can give you one piece of advise that can carry you through any situation. Trust yourself. You have a good head and a good heart. Trust them. If you really think something is right, or if you really think it's wrong, then trust yourself. Don't let other people tell you what you know. But think deep, too. You know better than to just go with the first thought in your head. Think things out a bit. Figure out the consequences. Decide if you can live with 'em. Then don't pussy out if it turns out you have to live with 'em. Like your dad says,"—here she made a macho scowl and mimicked Hap's rasp, and he barked a surprised laugh—"Stand up. Face up. Stick it out.' He's a smart guy, your father. He forgets that sometimes, but he is.

"Give him a hug for me, will ya? Tell him you love him. Even if he's being an ass. Is he being an ass now? I wouldn't be surprised. You know how he gets. Remember when he came back home, what he was like? That was hard. Remember how we got him back? We didn't let his shit get to us. We loved him anyway, and he finally remembered he was lovable.

"I love you so, so much. You are the very best of your dad and me. You are going to have an amazing life. You do what fulfills you, okay? Don't let people tell you what your life is supposed to be. You make of it what you want it to be. Wish I could see it happen.

"Okay, I'm too weepy here, and I meant this to be uplifting. Sorry about that. I just wanted to be sure to say goodbye. I'm so damn sorry, baby."

"I love you, my Hope."

The screen went dark.

Hap sat back and took a long drink of Jack. He didn't bother to dry his face. He'd become a weepy son of a bitch. He tried to think, but he was pretty far into the bottle, and he was bone tired. Vivian had asked him to watch that first. She was right—it was wrenching to watch, to know that Vivian and Hope would never sing together again brought the loss home in a new, explosive way. But she'd also talked about him, asked Hope to give him room. To forgive him. She'd known he'd see that, too.

He remembered the year after he got out. He'd had a hard time adjusting to his life outside. He'd felt isolated from his family, as if they'd formed a tighter circle without him. He'd felt unequal to them, as well—as if they'd grown past him while he'd been away. But more than any of that, he'd felt unworthy of them.

And he had been an ass. Drinking heavily, morose and sharp-tongued, absent. Part of him had wanted them to kick him to the curb. Instead, they'd been steady with him. They'd waited him out. Just as Frank had waited out his destructive fit earlier in the day.

It felt like there was something he should know, but he was too fucking tired, too fucking sad, too fucking angry to see it.

He opened the folder of Hope's childhood videos. He'd seen them all before, but not for a long time. He clicked the earliest, and flinched when it started. She'd added a soundtrack—just her playing guitar. He clicked through all of them—she'd done the same. There was also a folder named “VIDS NO DUB.”

She'd left them as much of her as she could. He didn't know anything about this computer stuff, but he imagined it must have taken a lot of time and effort. She must have done it after she'd been diagnosed. So, while she was so sick, during the little time she'd been alone, she'd put this effort into making it easier for her family to find and have what was left of her.

Fuck, he'd lost so fucking much when he lost her.

The last file in the folder was called “ARTSY BS.” Smiling, he clicked it. She'd put together a compilation from all the videos into one 25-minute piece, with soundtrack of Vivian's music, showing Hope growing from a tiny, serious-faced baby to a beautiful, serious young woman. His daughter. Their daughter. He looked at her sweet face, those soulful dark eyes, and saw her mother.

He wanted to make it right with her, he needed to, but what he had to tell her would only hurt her more. All he'd done since her mother took her last breath was hurt her more.

-oOo-

He dragged his ass to the garage the next day and put his time in. He needed to talk to Hope. He needed to man the fuck up and do it today. But the thought that he could lose her for good carved into his head like a buzzsaw.

At the end of the day, he stood in the lot, staring at his bike. He'd left four messages for Hope, and she had ignored them all, as she'd done every day since the day after the funeral. Two and a half weeks. He was going to have to go to Frank's and wait her out. Maybe try to get her to go out to the stream, like they used to. He wondered if she'd go.

Tig came up to him and swung an arm over Hap's shoulders. “Man, you look like a guy who needs a drink. Come on inside, brother.”

He almost refused, but he didn't. It was early still. Hope was still working. He went in and sat at the bar with his friend. Abel and Pep were playing pool. Hap barely noticed when, some time and several shots later, the kid hung up his cue and took off.

-oOo-

He was too drunk to talk to Hope. He knew it. He was too drunk to ride anywhere. He knew that, too. But the clubhouse was full of Sons getting blown, and he couldn't deal with it. He figured if he took it easy, he'd be okay.

And he was. He got home fine. Was starting to sober up even. What he saw as he pulled into his driveway sobered him up quite a bit more: two bikes, both of them Abel's: that pussy red bobber he'd ridden while he was a Prospect, and the Softail his folks had just bought him.

Two bikes. Abel's. Abel, who was spending time with his daughter. Abel was at his house. Someone else had ridden Abel's old bike to his house. They were here alone. Hap put two and two together and came up Mayhem. He parked his bike. He took his Glock out of his saddlebag and headed up the walk. His house was ablaze with light. His heart cramped at the sight; it looked like a home.

They weren't in the house. He went through every room. They weren't there. It didn't even look like they had been there, except that all the lights were on. Hap stood in the kitchen, momentarily perplexed, but still vibrating with whiskey and rage. He looked out the window over the kitchen sink and saw soft light coming from Vivian's music room.

He went out the back door.

What he saw when he entered the music room turned his head inside out. Abel's naked ass thrusting between his little girl's naked legs. She was moaning, her fingers digging into the patch inked into his back. He was talking, whispering things to her. Hap pointed his already-cocked gun, but he couldn't shoot. He'd hit Hope.

They hadn't noticed him, they were so wrapped up in—in—he set the Glock on Vivian's desk and yanked that piece of shit away from his girl. He'd just fucking kill him with his bare hands. It was better that way. With a fistful of pretty-boy blonde locks and the kid's arm yanked hard against his back, Hap lifted him off his feet and threw him out the door. Pouncing before the kid had his breath back, Hap let the rage take over.

Abel wasn't fighting back. He was trying to curl into a ball, but he wasn't trying to fight or even flee. He was just fucking taking it. Hap rose to his feet and shouted "Get up! Get up, you perverted piece of shit!" Abel lay there, naked and moaning, and Hap kicked him, hard, twice, in the back. "Get the fuck up!"

And then Hope was lying over Abel, still completely naked, screaming at him to stop. He had a dawning sense that she'd been screaming since he'd thrown Abel through the door.

"Daddy, no! No! Please stop!" She was sobbing and screaming, and Jesus, she didn't have a stitch on, lying over this kid who Hap *knew* was taking advantage of her. He *knew* it. He was a cocky piece of shit who had fucked everything with a gash within a 100-mile radius. Including his daughter.

He reached down and grabbed Hope's arm, yanking her off of Abel. "Get some fuckin' clothes on!" He shoved her toward the music room and turned back to Abel. He was going to kill this kid. Rip his arm off and beat him to death with it. Make him eat that

dick he was so proud of. Strangle him with his prissy fucking hair. He kicked him again. “Get UP!”

And then, behind him, his Glock fired. He ducked around to see Hope holding it and turning from where she’d shot at the garage. She’d aimed at and hit the stack of big bags of garden soil Vivian had been planning to use before she got sick; soil was running from the bullet hole in a little stream. Even in the midst of everything, he was proud that she’d fired somewhere that would take the bullet, rather than into the air, and that she was holding it steady, as he’d taught her. But now she was pointing it at him. She was still naked.

His naked daughter was pointing a gun at his head.

“Step back, Daddy. Get away from him.”

The rage receded and left him with a profound fatigue. His fists relaxed, and he backed away from Abel, who struggled to sit up. He was a mess.

Hope kept the gun trained on him and went to Abel to help him up. The danger was over; Hap wasn’t going to beat him anymore, but Hope still held the gun on him.

“Go inside, Daddy. Right now.”

He couldn’t leave them out here alone. “Midget, put the gun down. I’m not gonna hurt him. But I’m not leaving you out here alone. I need to talk to you.”

“Oh, we’re talkin’. Go inside. I’ll be in soon.”

“Hope—”

“Daddy, *get the fuck out!*”

This had to resolve, and now. They had to have drawn neighbors’ attention, and if any of them called the cops, this scene had to get done fast. He thought the odds no better than even that anybody had called; they all knew enough who he was to think twice about that. But he relented and went inside.

He watched from the patio door, though, as Hope got Abel to his feet and checked him over—both of them still standing fucking naked in the back yard. They squabbled a little, then went into the music room again. Hap put his hand on the doorknob, ready to go back out there, but in just a minute or two, they came back out, dressed, Abel somewhat less bloody, but bent some at the waist and limping badly.

Not so badly that he couldn’t ride, apparently, because Hap heard the Softail fire up. Only one bike, though. Hap went to the front and watched Abel ride away. Hope came up the walk and in the front door.

She handed him his now decocked Glock, butt first. He checked the cartridge and the chamber and set it on top of a bookcase. "Sit down with me, midge. We have to talk."

"You're drunk. I can smell you from here. Your hands are bleeding all over the floor. And you just beat up my boyfriend. I think I get to say what we're doing now. Come on."

She grabbed the sleeve of his t-shirt and pulled him to the kitchen. Pushing him at the table, she commanded, "Sit down and take your rings off." She went to the cabinet for the first aid kit. They kept a robust kit; Hap had needed patching up more than once.

He did as she asked, leaving only his wedding band. She brought the kit over and sat next to him, pulling cotton balls and hydrogen peroxide out to swab his knuckles. "I'm not drunk, midge. I was, but I'm not now."

"Well, you stink like a vat of Jack Daniels." She eased his left hand open carefully. She knew that one was bad after a fight. "And it's stupid to punch people in the face like that."

"Sorry. He taught you to ride?" He winced as she straightened his fingers out.

She gave him a defiant look. "Yeah, he did. I asked him to. And he's lending me his old bike until I can get my own." She held the look, daring him to protest.

He didn't take the dare. "I would've taught you."

"That's a lie. You don't think girls should ride."

No, he didn't. Certainly not his girl. Too dangerous to handle a machine like that on her own. But it looked like he lost that battle while he wasn't paying attention. "You bein' safe?" He was asking about more than the bike, but he didn't want to ask the rest of it more directly. Made him queasy. He didn't know if she'd hear the whole question, though.

She did. She looked pointedly into his eyes and said, "Yes, Daddy. Very safe." Then she looked back at his hands.

"He's your boyfriend?" Christ, that word stuck in his throat.

Her head came up as if she were surprised by the question. "What? I don't know. I don't know anything about anything anymore." She stopped and looked at him again. "Maybe. Or maybe not now. You really hurt him."

If he rode off on his own, Hap didn't really hurt him. Kid got off very lucky. "Sorry."

She snorted. "No, you're not."

“I’m sorry I left you.” That was true. For Hope, he was sorry for more than that. He was sorry for all the times he hurt his girl. He was sorry for the way he was about to hurt her. She looked him in the eye, and he tried to convey all that in his steady look back. She bandaged up his knuckles and packed the kit away. She put it back in its place in the cabinet over the fridge, and then she came back and sat next to him again.

“Jesus, Daddy. You’re a mess.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I am. Are you home? I need you home, midget. Miss you.” He had intended to play the father card and demand that she come home. He had thought about just packing up her shit while she was at work and bringing it back where it belonged. But he was tired. He was so fucking tired. He just wanted his girl home. He wanted to stop letting her and her mother down.

He couldn’t seem to stop, though.

“I don’t know. I need to think, but everything’s all confused right now. I’m so mad at you, Daddy. I know you’re sad, and maybe I see how you could do what you did. But it hurts. I miss mom so much. I miss Juice, too. And you and Frank? It’s hard to make that fit in my head. I need to work it out.” She started to say something more, but closed her mouth with a snap and looked down at her lap.

“Midget, talk to me.”

“You didn’t come home for me.”

That shocked the shit out of him. “What’re you talking about? ‘Course I did!”

Shaking her head, she whispered. “You stayed away until Juice died. You came back for Frank.”

Christ, no. No. She was right, but no, she was wrong. But he had no idea how to explain it. The fog over his time away was thick and getting thicker with every day. “Midge, no. That’s—that’s when Uncle Tig came for me, knocked some sense into me.” As soon as he said it, he knew he’d fucked up. He’d given Tig up, for one thing.

But she didn’t land on that. She heard the other, and she was hurt. “So you didn’t even want to come home? You’d still be gone?”

Fuck, he had to explain this right. “It’s not that I didn’t want to. I didn’t know how. I don’t know how to be good for you without your mom. I don’t think I can be.”

She sighed, long and sad, and put her hand on his arm. “I love you, Daddy.”

Relief swelled in his chest. “God, midge. Love you so much.” She stood up then and hugged him. He held her tight. He held on as long as she’d stay. When she sat back, he knew he had to tell her the last thing. He hated to do it, because they were on such shaky ground. But if they were starting again, they needed to start clean. Wasn’t like he could keep it a secret long, anyway, and he knew it would go even harder if she felt he’d been hiding something.

“There’s somethin’ else. It’s hard, and I’m real sorry I have to lay it on you.” He could see her trying to steel herself against the fear already in her eyes. He took a breath and just said it. “Frank’s pregnant.”

She hadn’t steeled herself against that. Hope gasped and went white, the shock rippling over her face. Shock became panic, and he watched her contending with what he’d said. Finally, she whispered, “Yours?”

“Might be. She doesn’t know. She says it’s Juice’s no matter what, though.” He leaned forward and tried to take her hand, but she yanked it away. “I’m so sorry.”

She was breathing hard. “You can’t have a baby with somebody else. With *Frank*? You can’t! Mom—oh, God, Mommy.” And she was crying. No, she was sobbing. Hap came off his chair onto his knees and tried to take her into his arms, but she leapt up and back. “What did you *do*, Daddy? What did you *do*? You’re right—you’re no good! It’s like you’re killing her again!”

That went straight through his heart and left a burning wake. If he’d been standing, he might well have fallen, but he was still on his knees. “God, midget, please. I—”

*“Shut up! Don’t call me that!”*

That sliced deeply, too, but he kept trying. “Please sit down. We need to talk this through.”

“Fuck you!”

She bolted. He tried to grab her as she ran past him, but he missed. She ran out of the house and to the red bike. He followed as far as the porch and stopped. She had to be headed to Frank’s, maybe Jax and Tara’s. She had no place else to go. He’d give her some space, let her calm down, go to her in the morning and get her to talk.

He would fix this. He would; he had to. But he was so goddamn tired.

## CHAPTER 17: Abel

Fuck. His mom and dad were both home. He should have gone to the clubhouse. But he was hurt pretty bad, and he wanted a good shower and a comfortable bed. Abel parked his bike and hobbled into the house.

His parents were sitting in the kitchen, talking. They looked up when he came in the side door. His mom leapt out of her chair.

“Jesus, Abe! What happened to you?” She led him to the table and sat him down, immediately stripping him of his kutte and t-shirt. He hadn’t seen the damage, really. He’d gotten himself dressed and out of there as fast as he could. Hope had wanted to fix him up, but he’d needed to get away from her, too.

He’d been caught beyond off guard, and Hap had come in so hard and so fast, that all Abel could do was try to protect himself. He’d curled up in a pussy ball, naked, and let Hap beat the shit out of him. He’d been saved by a naked girl. He was so humiliated he was sick to his stomach.

Happy won. Abel couldn’t deal with this shit. He’d leave Hope alone. He felt . . . weird about it, but her dad would have killed him tonight.

His dad was still sitting at the table, watching quietly. Finally, he said, “Hap?” Abel nodded. “I warned you, son.”

His mom huffed. “Jax, really? Now? Can I at least see how bad he’s hurt before we start in on this?”

He sat there while his mom sewed up his face and wrapped his ribs. “Looking at your back, bud, you’re going to pee some blood for a while. He got your kidney.” She pushed on what was very obviously a bad bruise on his back, and Abel winced. “Is this from a punch or a kick?”

Jax and Abel said together, “Kick.”

She looked at her son and then her husband. “Shit. I really want to bring you in and get some x-rays, maybe an MRI, see if there’s serious internal damage.”

“No, Mom. Not doin’ it. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. I just put fifteen stitches in your face. At least two ribs might be broken, and you could have internal bleeding. Fine is a long way from where you are.”

He stared stonily at her until she sighed. “Alright. But you promise me—if your pain gets worse, especially in your back, or you have more than just a drop of blood in your urine, I’m taking you in, understood?”

“Yeah. Can I have a couple pills, though?”

She rolled her eyes. “I shouldn’t, it’ll mask your pain symptoms. But only two, only now.” She got him a dose and a glass of water, and he swallowed the pills down. He looked at his dad, who was staring at Abel’s hands.

“You didn’t fight back?” At his dad’s question, Abel looked down at his unmarked knuckles. He shook his head, keeping his eyes down. He was embarrassed. No—ashamed.

His dad stood. Abel thought he was walking away in disgust, but he stopped at his side. He leaned down and kissed the top of Abel’s head. “That was the right call, son. That was good.”

Abel looked up, surprised, but his dad was already leaving the room. He turned to his mom, who was watching his dad go. She turned back to him, but Abel couldn’t read her expression. She sat down and started to pack up the medical supplies.

“Is she worth all this, Abel? Are you just trying to win a prize here, or do you care about her?”

He’d already gotten the prize, what he’d thought he wanted from her. No good reason he hadn’t taken her straight back to Frank’s house yesterday. Instead, he’d taken her all the way to fucking Angel’s Camp and bought her dinner. Fuck, he’d asked her to stay out with him all night. His dad had come down hard when he’d finally gotten home. Then, today—letting her ride to her house—where her dad *lived*—and *fucking* her there. Fuck! He was taking crazier risks since he’d popped her cherry than before. What the fuck was he doing?

He liked her. He liked hanging with her. He liked to see her smile—those gorgeous eyes, usually so sad lately, lit right up. He felt sorry for all the shit she was going through. When she was stressed out, he wanted to soothe her; when she was sad, he wanted to make her feel better. And damn, he wanted to touch her. She was beautiful. The way she responded to him! Even when she didn’t know what they were doing—and everything was new to her—she was wet and limber, and . . . *damn*.

“Abel, I asked you a question.”

He hated the look on his mom’s face. He was used to it, but he was tired of it, and he hated it. It was her long-suffering, disappointed face. Who was she to be disappointed in him now? He was a man, dammit. He wasn’t a kid anymore. Fuck, he wasn’t even *her* kid. Thomas, perfect fucking Thomas, who never even saw the inside of the principal’s office, who got the grades and played the sports and had the friends and was off becoming a suit—he was her kid. Abel was the kid of a fucking junkie who’d almost killed him before he was even born.

He wanted to tell her to go fuck herself. No, he didn't. He sighed and rubbed his hand over the old scar on his belly. He was hurting and tired, and his head was spinning. He thought he was starting to feel whatever she'd given him. He wanted to be able to talk to her. He couldn't talk to his dad; his dad was on Happy's side, and all he'd get would be another lecture about brotherhood and protecting family.

"I don't know, Mom. I like her. I don't know." Damn, he was tired.

She put her hands on one of his. "Oh, bud. I don't think there's a girl in the world you could have fallen for that could make your life harder. Hope is . . . she's special. And now she's all Happy's got."

"Why? Why is she so fucking special? Why is she so much better than me?" God, he was whining now. He needed to go to bed.

"She's not better, Abel. It's just . . . Hap and Viv went through a lot to have her. And now her mom's gone. She's his little girl. You're older. And c'mon, bud. You haven't been the kind of guy a dad could trust to be nice to his daughter."

Yeah, that talk had been going pretty great, right up to the end. She had to get a dig in, though. He stood up, groaning. He hurt from his eyebrows to his knees. "I'm goin' to bed."

"Okay. Abel—I love you."

He looked back from the doorway. "Night, Mom."

-oOo-

Abel woke so stiff and sore he could barely move, but he badly needed to piss, so he rolled his ass out of bed and trudged to the bathroom—where, yes, he pissed pink. Nice. He'd keep it to himself, see how it went.

He stood in the hallway for a second, trying to decide if he wanted to work his way to the kitchen and get something to eat, or if he just wanted to go back to bed. He heard his dad talking loudly—not yelling, but almost—and then, *fuck*, he heard Happy. He stood there another couple of seconds, seriously considering getting back into his bed and staying there. But that was pussy bullshit. He grabbed his jeans off the chair in his room and yanked them on, ignoring the pain. Trying to, anyway.

On his way down the stairs, he made out the first clear sentence of the argument. He stopped and listened. It was Happy, who was now yelling: "He knows where she is, goddammit. He's got to know!"

His father's voice was firm. "You need to calm your shit down, man. He didn't say anything about it last night. And you did all the damage to my kid I'm gonna stand down for. So sit, and I'll get him, and we'll talk like fuckin' brothers."

"That boy's not my brother." Abel laughed to himself. *Asshole.*

Now his dad was yelling. "He's *my* boy, and he *is* your brother, Hap. He's a patch. You don't want to be his brother, that's *your* choice you bring to the table. I'm sick of this shit. Now sit the fuck down or get the fuck out."

There was a pause, and Abel took another step down. Then he heard Happy, much more quietly, say, "Fuck, Jax. She's my girl."

"I know, man. We'll find her."

*Fuck.* Something had happened to Hope. Abel's heart was racing. He finished descending the stairs and went into the living room. "What happened?"

Hap had been sitting in an arm chair; he stood when Abel came into the room and went straight for him. His dad held him back. "I said *calm.*"

Hap stopped but addressed Abel instead of his dad. "Where's Hope?"

Abel shook his head. He'd left her on the driveway, still trying to convince him to come inside and let her clean him up. No way he was going to go into the house with her father. Humiliated and in a lot of pain, he'd been a dick about it. "I don't know, man. I left her with you."

Happy's snarl was intimidating. "You son of a bitch. You know where she is."

"I don't. I swear." He looked at his father. "Pop, I swear, I haven't heard anything since I left there last night."

His dad nodded and turned to Happy. "She's not at Frank's, she's not here. Where else would she go?"

"There's no place. She's not at the clubhouse, either. There's nothing. She's not picking up her phone, and her voice mail is full."

Abel had a thought. "Call Thomas."

Both his dad and Hap gave him a startled look—neither had thought of it. His dad called Thomas, who hadn't heard from her but would keep a lookout.

When his dad ended the call, he said, "LA's 350 miles away. Would she know where she's goin'? Could she buy gas? Fuck, she even know how to pump gas?"

Hap answered, his voice intense and frantic. “She should have a 50 on her. It’s a rule. So she could buy some gas. Don’t know about the rest. She doesn’t even have fuckin’ ID. And she left around nine last night—that’s almost twelve hours ago. If that’s where she was headed, she should be there by now. She didn’t have enough for a fuckin’ motel.” He turned on Abel. “This is you, shithead. You taught her to fuckin’ ride. And now she’s gone.”

Abel bit his tongue and didn’t say Hope was a lot more fucking vulnerable because Hap had kept her locked up in a damn Charming-size safe her whole life. He didn’t need another punch in the mouth this morning, and it wouldn’t accomplish anything else. But what an old asshole.

His dad put his hand on Hap’s shoulder. “Maybe she found a safe place to rest a while. We’ll probably hear from Thomas any minute. Even if she didn’t head to LA, she’s gotta be someplace. Cute girl riding that flashy red bobber—gonna get some notice. We’ll find her, Hap. Let’s get to the clubhouse and make some plans.” He turned to Abel. “You okay to ride today?”

He was sore as hell and had not been planning on sitting a bike, but he was worried—he was scared—and wanted to help. If she went to LA, that was a long fucking ride for her third day on the road. She wasn’t ready for it. “Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

“Get dressed, then. We need to get movin’.”

## CHAPTER 18: Happy

If something had happened to Hope, he was done. He'd ride off a damn cliff. Eat his gun. Open his throat. Rip his own guts out with his bare hands.

For now, though, he held the tattered pieces of his mind together by sheer will and focused on finding his girl. Abel was right. LA—Thomas—was the logical place she'd go. Still, 350 miles was far, way too fucking far, but she should have been there by now.

*So where the fuck was she?*

The Sons were sitting around the table. Hap couldn't sit still. They should not be fucking sitting here, they should be looking. He knew they needed to coordinate, but he was jumping out of his skin. If the delay got her hurt, he'd take every fucking one of these assholes down with him. He checked both his phones for the hundredth time. Nothing.

Jax was speaking; Hap needed to focus. "I've got the Nomads and charters in four states on the lookout. Thomas has put out the word on campus and around his apartment. Roosevelt is looking, too, using the Charming PD resources, but under the radar for now. We're working on the idea that she'd go south, to Thomas, but we can't be sure of it, not unless she gets in touch with somebody, and that ain't lookin' likely now. I want us overlapping with the other charters. So we're out in twos and threes, headin' out north, south, east, west. Best we can do. Hap, Abel, and I will head toward LA. Tig, Chibs: you head west to the Bay Area. Pep and Butch: Tahoe. Joey and Phil: north. Except for us goin' to LA, you got a 150 mile radius. Stop everywhere you can think of, talk to everybody. You got a marker, call it in." He passed copies, one for each team, of a photograph of Hope around as he talked. It was Hap's favorite, taken a couple of months before Vivian was diagnosed. She looked sweet and lovely. She looked happy.

Hap shoved back from the table and stood. "I gotta get movin'."

Jax nodded. "Let's move out." He struck the gavel, and the Sons rose from the table.

-oOo-

Hap fucking hated riding this search with Abel. He stayed ahead of him as much as he could, because every time he saw that fucking patch, the rage in his head about doubled. When they pulled off to ask around, he wanted to punch the shithead every time he opened his mouth. Hope had been right—he'd done some real damage to the kid last night. His face was a swollen freak show, and he was walking carefully, favoring his left side. It wasn't enough. He had no rein at all on his hatred of the bastard who'd fucked his little girl. In her dead mother's room.

He was losing his fucking mind.

He needed to set it aside and think only of Hope. He had to find her safe. She had to be okay. They stopped at every gas station, restaurant, convenience mart, and truck stop along I-5. They got a lead near Mendota, when a call from the Fresno charter pulled them off the interstate. SAMFRES had a hit at a mom and pop diner in town. Hap, Jax, and the kid hauled ass there, and met Harlon and Cade from Fresno. They made their brotherly greeting and went in.

The place was open 24 hours, and a waitress still on shift, working a double, had recognized Hope's photograph. She'd come in around 2am and asked for directions back to the interstate.

The waitress was a narrow, middle-aged woman with brightly yellow hair twisted on the back of her head and a decidedly maternal air about her. Hap looked on as Jax glanced at the nametag pinned to her polyester chest and gave her the slick smile that had been working for him since he was a kid. Abel had that fucking smile, too. "That's great, Lynda. Thank you so much. Anything else you can tell us?"

Lynda smiled right back at Jax, obviously charmed. "I don't think so. Poor thing looked real tired. I asked if she wanted a bite, but she said she was out of money. That worried me a lot, so," she paused and looked around, "I told her it was on the house. She wouldn't take it, though. She headed back out, riding a red Harley."

Hap spoke up. "That was 2 this morning, you said?"

Lynda didn't look nearly as charmed by Hap as she was by Jax. Intimidated was a more apt description. Fine with him. "Yes, sir. Bar across the way was closing. We always get a rush then, and she came in as we were fillin' up good with drunks." She stopped, hesitated, and finally added, "She got some attention, now I think of it. Met some dirtbag in the door as she was going out. He got real grabby, but she did some kinda move and got clear of him. Nothin' came of it—he said somethin' filthy and came on in for his grease, and she rode off."

"What did he say?" Hap could feel his jaw twitching. His teeth ached from clenching and grinding, trying to maintain.

"No sir, sorry. I don't talk like that. It was filthy and ungentlemanly. But he left her be after that."

"Okay, we gotta go." Jax smiled at the waitress. "Thanks again, Lynda. You're the first help we've had." He handed her a 20-dollar bill.

She took it with a grateful nod and slid it into her pocket. "I hope you find her soon. She's such a sweet thing. Worried me that she was out on her own so late."

There was no way Hap was going to be able to hold it together for much longer.

-oOo-

With the news that she'd been headed south, as they'd thought, Jax called in the other parties. The ones close enough to join the southward search effectively he called down, so Chibs and Tig were on their way south. He sent the others back to the clubhouse, putting Pep in charge of organizing a tech search.

Hap just wanted him off the phone so they could fucking move. They were continuing the canvass, with SAMFRES moving down side roads now as well.

Hap, Jax, and Abel stayed to I-5. That's the road she'd wanted. Thomas still hadn't heard from her. Hap knew something was wrong. She was headed south, so she was heading to Thomas. Only thing that made any sense. She'd been in Mendota twelve hours earlier; should've only been three hours or so more for her to get back to I-5 and stay on it all the way to LA. He knew. She was in danger. She was hurt. Or she was dead. He knew.

Fighting the urge to simply let go of his sanity, he barely noticed when Abel, without warning, suddenly veered away, rode over the grass median, and took off northward, the way they'd come. It took him a second to process what his eyes had seen. By then, Jax had turned, too. Hap followed. Abel had looped, getting back into the southbound lanes and pulling off onto the shoulder. He dismounted and ran down the embankment. By the time Jax and Hap had pulled up alongside his bike, Abel was at the bottom of the steep hill, in waist-high brush. He was struggling through to something—and then Hap saw the red glint in the sunlight. A big-flake metallic gas tank.

“Hope! Fuck!” He tore down the hill. Abel had reached the bike and was struggling to lift it—but Hap had fucked him up hard last night, and he was getting nowhere. As Hap closed in to help him, he saw his daughter, bloody and unconscious under the bike. He roared his anguish.

“Christ! Careful—don't fucking rock it! Midget—Hope! Oh, Christ!”

She wasn't moving. Abel was still struggling with the bike as Hap finally got his hands on it. But they had to lift the fucker straight up so they didn't hurt her more. He couldn't do it on his own or with the hobbled kid. Jax came up and eased his son back, away from the bike, so he could take his place. Hap waited for him to get his hands under the other side. Jax met Hap's eyes. “Ready? On three. One, two, THREE.” They hoisted it up a couple of feet. Hap's arms were shaking, his back and legs were screaming. But they got it clear of her and put it down.

Abel was already at her side. Hap turned and almost yanked him away in fury, but he stopped. She was still wearing a helmet, but Abel was carefully brushing hair from her eyes and saying, “Hope, wake up. Wake up, babe.” He looked up at Hap. “She's alive.”

Hap went to her other side. “Don't move her,” he warned Abel. He heard Jax calling 911.

He lifted her wrist to feel her pulse; it was strong, and Hap nearly cried. She was bleeding, and he couldn't tell from where. Her leg was obviously broken—that accounted for some of the blood. And she was unconscious. But she was alive, and her heart was strong.

“Midget. Hold on for me. I got you now, okay? Love you.”

He looked at Abel, who was paying him no attention at all, focused as he was on Hope. Christ. Jax was right—there was something there. Hap could read people. It was something he was especially adept at, even now, with his head so full of sewage. He might not want the message, but it was coming through loud and clear.

What was written all over Abel fucking Teller's face was love.

## CHAPTER 19: Hope

Hope's dream of her mother faded into the back of her consciousness, and her first clear, wakeful sense was pain. Everything hurt, but especially, as she continued to ease into the waking world, her leg. Her head. Her arms. Her stomach. No, it was everything. Nothing especially, all of it badly.

"Hey, midge? You comin' back to me?" She felt her father's hand around hers. His thick, tough palm. She opened her eyes. It was too bright, though, and she closed them again—but not before she saw a shaved head sitting next to her.

"Daddy?" As soon as she said it, awareness and memory fell on her in a rush. "Oh, Daddy, I was so scared."

His face was next to hers then, and she felt his lips on her cheek, her forehead, her nose. "It's okay now, midge. You're okay. I'm here, and you're okay."

"Is Abel mad about his bike?" She must have wrecked it bad.

"No way, girl. I'm not mad. Just glad you're gonna be okay." Abel was there, too? Abel and her dad in the same room? She opened her eyes again and braved the bright pain.

She saw him, standing at the foot of the bed. Oh, she was in the hospital. Okay. He looked terrible, his face bruised and scabby. "Hi. Sorry."

"No sweat." He smiled—that had to hurt.

"Did you fall asleep, midge? That what happened?"

She turned to her dad, sitting right next to her, holding her hand, and shook her head. She remembered very clearly what happened—at least until she was tearing down the hill trying to figure out how to control the bike. But she was tired and it was too hard to explain. Plus, it scared her all over again to think about it. So she just shook her head and closed her eyes. She heard her dad say her name like a question, "Midget?," as she slid back into sleep.

-oOo-

She woke again when a nurse was poking at her. As soon as she opened her eyes, the heavysset woman in yellow scrubs said, "Mornin' cutie. Just a little stick," and she shoved a needle in her arm. Hope watched her blood fill three tubes. She looked up; her dad and Abel were still there. Now Uncle Jax was here, too. They were standing along the back wall as if they were in a lineup.

When the nurse left, her dad came and sat next to her again. "You look more awake, midge. Feelin' better?"

She felt awaker, but not better. What she didn't feel, though, was mad. She wasn't angry at all at her dad. Or Frank. Or Abel, who'd been pretty mean outside her house that night, before he drove off. She'd been furious, overwhelmed and sick with anger and hurt. There had been so much badness foaming in her blood that she had to run away from it. That didn't make any sense, but all she could think of at the time was to run. Go. Flee.

Her dad and Frank were having a baby. It didn't even matter if the baby was his. She knew what he would do. She tested the waters of her head to see if that knowledge made her feel like it did yest—whenever it was he'd told her. She realized she didn't know what day it was. She also realized that she wasn't disgusted anymore. Sad, yes. She wished it weren't true. But it was, and she knew that it didn't matter. She needed her daddy. It was like what had happened had scared her straight somehow. She had clarity. She didn't feel confused at all.

“I love you, Daddy.”

His face split into a huge grin, and twenty years dropped away. He hadn't looked like that since her mom got sick. “Love you, midge.” He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to hers. “We okay, you and me?”

“Yeah. We're okay.” From the corner of her eye, she saw Uncle Jax pull Abel out of the room. That was okay, too. For now.

Her dad sat back, holding her hand in both of his. “Can you tell me what happened?”

She didn't want to. Her dad was going to freak, and she liked him the way he was right this second—he looked *happy*. She hadn't thought she'd ever see him look like that again. But she had to tell him. She got her thoughts in order, feeling a piece of the fear she felt last night—or whenever it was.

“How long was I out? Was I at home yesterday?”

“Day before. We found you yesterday afternoon. You first woke up around midnight. You didn't talk, though, until early this morning. It's about 10 now. You're lucky, midge. You were out a pretty long time. Had everybody worried. Had me scared outta my head.”

“Sorry, Daddy. I'm really sorry.”

“S'okay. I'm sorry, too. Tell me what happened, though.”

She took a deep breath—it hurt—and did. “I was riding to Thomas. He's the only person I know who maybe I could talk to. Though probably not, he's been a big dork lately about everything.”

“What do you mean?” He looked surprised—of course he did. Her dad thought Thomas was awesome. She did, too, though she was thinking twice, lately.

“Just . . . like he’s better. He’s kinda starting to act like other people about the club. I don’t like it. We’ve been mostly fighting since Juice’s funeral.”

“Sorry, midget. I didn’t know.”

“I know. It’s okay. You’ve had your own stuff.”

He laughed bitterly at that.

Hope went on with her story. “Anyway, I didn’t know where else to go, so I went that way. I pulled off for gas somewhere, and then I got lost trying to get back to the freeway, and I ended up riding around these little towns and through, like, farmland and stuff. I found a diner place that was open and asked for directions. It was really crowded and people were rowdy, but the waitress lady was nice. She told me how to get back to the freeway.”

“Yeah, we talked to her. That’s how we knew you’d be on I-5.”

“She was nice. Anyway, I got hung up in the door with this drunk jerk. He had his hands all over me”—she saw her dad clench at that—“but I popped him in the chest and spun out of his way, like you showed me. He went inside, and I headed for the freeway.”

Her dad cut in. “Waitress saw all that, told us about it. You tellin’ me he hunted you down?” Her dad was a quick thinker. She nodded.

“Not right away, it was like an hour later, maybe? I had to pee, so I was at a gas station. The guy behind the counter wouldn’t let me use the bathroom unless I bought something, but I didn’t have much money, and I didn’t know if I’d need more gas. I tried to talk him into just letting me pee, but he was a jerk. I finally bought a candy bar.

“When I came out of the bathroom, the guy from the diner was leaning on a pickup, parked next to the bike. He was really gross to me. I was scared, and I got away as fast as I could. But—”

“Hold on. Tell me what he did. Exactly.”

“Daddy, no.” She didn’t want to talk about it. She had been disgusted and terrified. No one had ever touched her like that. She’d kept her head, though, scared as she was. And God, she’d been scared, flying down the freeway, going way faster than she ever had before, over 100, the headlights on the big pickup still bearing down on her. She’d been sure he was going to run her right over. She guessed he would have if she hadn’t gone off the road instead.

“Yes. I want to know exactly. Did he hurt you?”

“Mostly he just scared me.”

“*Mostly?* Hope, don’t make me ask again.”

She hated when he said that. She was sure it was a totally empty unspoken threat. He wasn’t going to hurt her. She didn’t even know why that scared her. But it always did. “He grabbed at me, and when I shoved him off, he grabbed my hair and snatched the candy bar and tried to shove it in my mouth. For practice, he said.”

He dad jumped out of his chair and walked a few steps away. He came immediately back and sat down, taking a breath before he took her hand again. “He did hurt you.”

“Not really. He didn’t get a chance to actually do it. I kicked him in the balls and got away.”

He barked a short laugh. “Good girl. But he followed you?”

“Yeah. Ran me off the road. I remember going down a hill, trying to figure out what to do. But that’s it, until here.”

“You landed at the bottom with the bike on top of you. You’re a very lucky girl, midge. I got no idea how you weren’t crushed.” He leaned forward, bringing her hand to his lips for a kiss. “Now, I need you to tell me every detail you remember about the guy and his truck.”

-oOo-

She could hear arguing outside her door, and then Abel came in, looking pissed. Wow, her dad really messed him up. His whole face was one big bruise. He had a stitched cut over one cheek and another through the opposite eyebrow. Good thing his mom was a surgeon.

“What’s going on?”

He stood at the side of her bed. “Your dad and my dad are gonna be gone for a little while, I guess. Okay if I hang with you?”

“Sure. They leaving because of what happened to me?”

“Yeah. You don’t need to know more.”

“Fuck you, Abel.” He raised his eyebrows at her and immediately winced. “I’m the one that’s in the hospital. I get to know what’s going on.”

He grinned on the side of his mouth that wasn’t split. “Not much I can say here. But Chibs and Tig are here, too. They’re meeting Fresno halfway to start a search. Your

dad'll be back right after the meet. When they find what they're looking for, they'll keep it for him. You know what that means?"

She huffed. "Yeah. I'm not a moron."

"No, but you don't know much, girl. How much you don't know surprises me."

"Why was there yelling out there?" Changing the subject seemed better than starting an argument. Plus, there *was* a lot she didn't know. *Losing* an argument didn't sound fun at all.

He looked awkward. "I want in, they won't let me. Pissed me off."

"Why?"

"They say it's 'cuz your dad messed me up too much."

"No—why do you want in?"

After a beat, he met her eyes. "I want to hurt the guy who hurt you."

She didn't look away. This was one of those things she didn't know about, so she didn't know if he was telling her something. Felt like he was. She knew she liked that her getting hurt made him mad. It seemed weird to like it, somehow, but it was true.

He sat in the chair her father had been occupying. "I'm sorry I was such a dick to you the other night. I was pretty embarrassed about what happened with your dad. But I had no cause to take it out on you."

"It's okay. I'm sorry he messed you up like that. It was really stupid for us to—you know—at my house."

He laughed. "Fuck? Yeah, it was. You make me stupid, babe."

The word *fuck* sounded harsh to her, but she guessed it was the right word. "Sorry."

He winked—and winced. It was pretty funny watching him fight his own face. "Don't be. I kinda like it. When it's not gettin' me flattened, at least."

"Looks like things are better with him now? You've been in the same room and stuff, with me, and nobody got any bloodier."

"Yeah. I don't know. Since we found you, he's been chill with me. Don't know if it'll last. I guess we'll see."

"Will we?"

“If you’re not too mad about what I said.” He leaned forward and put his hand over hers, rubbing across her knuckles with his thumb. She liked when he did that.

“Nah. I owe you a couple of punches to the ear, though. I’ll be taking those, but I’ll wait till you’re feeling better.”

He chuckled. “Thanks. Hey, Hope—can I kiss you?”

“Won’t it hurt your mouth?”

He answered with a nonchalant shrug. When she nodded, he stood up so he could lean over her. It was a while before he sat back down. Must not have hurt much at all.

-oOo-

Her dad was back within a couple of hours. Abel didn’t leave when he came back. Her dad didn’t even make him give up the chair. He just came over and kissed Hope on the forehead, said “Hey, midget. Love you,” and pulled up another chair. They watched TV together—TV bugged Hope, but it wasn’t like she could go dancing, so the entertainment options were limited—and when her dad called out for decent food, he ordered some for Abel, too.

Hope was unsettled by her dad’s change of attitude. Then again, she was unsettled by her own change of attitude, too. She felt a thousand times better, sitting in the hospital with a compound fracture, three broken ribs, a concussion, internal bleeding, a couple dozen stitches, and half her body black and blue, than she had in, what, nine months? Almost ten? Since her mom told her she had cancer. She felt calm. Her head was quiet. Maybe it was the pain meds, but it sure was nice.

Frank called to check on her, and they had a normal conversation, except that Frank was uncharacteristically chatty. She said she was coming down to Fresno General tomorrow, but Hope said not to, she’d be discharged in a few days anyway, and she was good with her dad and Abel. Frank huffed and told her she was just like her dad; he hadn’t let her come, either.

Then Hope said, simply, “I’m okay with it, Frank. Or, I will be.” Her dad looked over at her, but she ignored him. Frank was quiet for a long time. Then she said, “You’re a spectacular young woman, kiddo. I really love you.”

“I love you, too. We’ll talk when I’m home, okay?” She looked at her dad now, met his eyes. “You, me, and my dad. We’ll talk.”

“You know it. I’ll see you soon.”

-oOo-

The day before she was released, her dad got a call on the prepay. His part of the conversation was four words: “Yeah . . . Where? . . . Got it.” He shoved the phone in his pocket and turned to Hope. “You spare Romeo for a few hours, midge?”

She understood. She looked over at Abel, who had also understood and looked shocked—and avid.

Her dad had just asked her if she minded if he took her boyfriend along to go kill a guy.

No wonder she didn’t understand normal people. No wonder they didn’t understand her. They didn’t live in the same world at all.

She didn’t mind. In fact, she was glad—she saw her father making an attempt to, like, *bond* with Abel. “Yeah, sure.”

Her dad turned to Abel. “Still want in?”

Abel stood, and only winced the slightest bit. “Yeah, Hap. You know I do.”

“Think you’re up to it?—don’t front, boy. Know your limits. Things fuck up if you overextend.”

“I’m in. I’m good.”

“Let’s roll, then.” He kissed Hope on the forehead. “We’ll be back in a few hours—then order supper. You want some of that Indian shit?”

She laughed. Her dad was a meat and potatoes dude through and through. “Yes, please.”

Abel kissed her on the lips, and they left to do mayhem. She was glad of it. She hoped that creepy cocksucker paid dear.

Nope, she didn’t live in the normal world. Everybody thought she was innocent, and there *were* things she didn’t know. But she knew the world she lived in. It was what she understood. It was where she belonged. Thomas was wrong. There wasn’t a life for her outside the club, outside Charming.

She was the daughter of a Son.

## CHAPTER 20: Abel

Abel's jaw had about dropped to the floor when Hap asked if he wanted in on the retaliation. That he asked was a crystal clear sign that Abel had a chance to gain some ground. Comport himself well on this job, and maybe earn some respect. At least some room.

It was a big job, though, and Abel admitted—to himself, only himself—that he felt anxious. He'd never killed anybody. He'd never seen anybody tortured. He'd heard stories about the way Hap worked, and he knew this wouldn't be pretty. The guy they held had hurt Hap's only daughter—his only living blood kin.

This guy was going to die hard.

They rode to an old barn about fifteen miles outside Fresno. Abel knew it as a SAMFRES location—Cade's ancestral homestead. He had a newer house and barn—a compound really—a couple of miles closer to the main road. This old stead was obscured by forest growth now. There were five bikes parked along the side of the barn, including Abel's dad's, Chibs', and Tig's; Hap and Abel added theirs to the line. The SAMCRO van was parked deeper into the woods.

As they dismounted and headed to the doors, Hap grabbed Abel's arm. "Things've been easy since you started wearin' a kutte, son. You need to check yourself right here, be *sure* you're really in. You can't puss out once we're through those doors, you hear me? I'm gonna work this motherfucker hard. You're all in or you're out. Right here. You want in, you do what I tell you. No hesitation, no question. Any thinking you have to do about it, you do it where you're standing. No shame in knowing you're not ready for this."

He heard everything Hap said. He understood it all, took it seriously. But what resonated was the word "son." He took a beat. Then he said, "I'm in. I'm ready." And he prayed that he was.

"Good. Watch and learn, son."

The guy was bound hand and foot and strung up by a winch from the hayloft, hooked through the ropes binding his wrists. His feet dangled about two feet off the ground. There was a hay bale more or less under him. He'd been stripped to his tighty whities and had duct tape over his bearded mouth. He looked whole. He was mostly still, whimpering occasionally.

He was heavy, with manboobs and a belly overhanging his underwear—which bore a wet, yellowish stain. Pussy. His ashy blond hair was lank and his beard was sparse but on the long side. He was no woman's fantasy, that was certain.

Abel's dad, Chibs, and Tig came up right away to greet Hap and him, followed closely by Pep and Butch. Harlon and Cade joined the circle.

Hap asked, “He know anything?”

Harlon answered: “Nope. Found him, stripped him, tied him, hauled him. He begged to know what we wanted till we gagged him. Now he just whines like a bitch.” He laughed. “Was half tempted to have Cade go all Deliverance on him.”

“Shut the fuck up, Harlon. My dick ain’t goin’ anywhere near that fat, smelly ass.” Cade crossed his arms.

Hap interrupted. “Oh, he’s gonna squeal like a pig. Won’t be a dick makes him, though. Bring him down. Want a sit down with him first.”

Butch nodded and walked to the winch line. He released the line until the guy could sit on the hay bale, but he kept it taut, so he couldn’t relax his arms. Even so, he sobbed with relief when his weight came off his shoulders.

Hap pulled another musty bale over and sat in front of the guy—whose name, Abel knew, was Mike Dolan, Mikey to his buddies. When he was seated, Hap ripped the duct tape off Dolan’s face, bringing rather a lot of beard with it.

Dolan took a huge, panicked breath and yelled, “What do you fuckin’ want? I ain’t got nothin’ you could want!” Without a word, Hap backhanded him across the face.

He glanced at Tig, who immediately, as if he knew exactly what that slight glance meant, pulled Hope’s photograph from his kutte and handed it to Hap.

Hap held it up to Dolan. “*Mikey*. My man. This is my daughter. Her name is Hope. She’s 17.”

Dolan’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t do anything to her, I swear. Just teased her a little is all.”

Hap nodded as if he understood. “You and me, we know the truth, don’t we? *Mikey*. And now you know the score. You see me. You see my face. You see the faces of my brothers. You see our colors. You know what that means, don’t you? *Mikey*. You know.”

Mikey simply mewed.

He turned to Abel and gestured toward a large toolbox. “In my kit, there’s a plastic bag full of rubber gloves. Get three pairs: for me, Tig, and you.” Abel saw Hap exchange a look with his dad, who, after a beat, nodded. He got the gloves out, and all three men put them on. Dolan was screaming now, wordless entreaties for mercy.

Hap had more instructions for Abel. “Now, get a red shop towel out of there. Douse it with gasoline, then wring it out good—almost dry.” Abel did. “Good. Bring it to me.”

Hap forced it into Dolan's mouth and strapped it down tight with the duct tape Harlon had handed him. Then he nodded to Butch, who pulled the winch line up again, though not as high. Just enough to get Dolan's feet off the ground. He let loose a muffled screamed and then retched as the breath he needed for the scream sucked gasoline down his throat. He didn't puke, though.

Hap stood. "Okay. Kutties off, shirts off. I want to get back to my girl fast, so I'm wearing a suit. Up to you if you want one, too, but I recommend it. This is gonna get sloppy." He went to the toolkit and lifted the trays out until he reached bottom, from which he pulled a disposable hazmat suit. He put it on.

Dolan screamed again, and retched again. After that, he tried to be quiet.

He tried. He didn't succeed.

They worked him for almost two hours. All three of them were covered in Dolan's blood. Abel spent the whole time fighting down his gorge, but he never hesitated. When Hap told him to do something, he did it, no matter what it was. He didn't even look to his father for confirmation or support. In fact, he eventually forgot there were other Sons in the barn. He saw only Hap, Tig, and this decreasingly human thing which had been the man who'd hurt Hope.

He could not believe Dolan stayed alive, much less conscious, but Hap was expert at his work, and Dolan didn't die or even get a break until Hap was ready for him to do so. His eyes stayed open, blinking, showing every sensation of pain and terror he felt. His eyes looked crazy, too, and oddly focused. Abel wondered if the gasoline fumes were making all the sensations even stronger.

Then, when he was ready, Hap shocked Abel again. "You want the kill?"

"What? It's yours."

Hap shook his head. "I don't need it. I'm offering it to you. Not telling you. Offering."

He thought. He'd never killed anyone. He'd never done any of the things he'd done in this barn. He was sick and overwhelmed. And he was absolutely terrified of Happy Lowman. If he'd seen this before he'd become involved with Hope, he would not have come within 100 yards of her. He'd been much, much stupider than he'd even known.

Much luckier, too. Today, the beating he took didn't seem so bad.

He was in too deep, he knew, to back out now, and not because he was afraid to hurt her—though, yeah, he was going to be the best boyfriend who ever lived. But because he was in love with her. He'd known that kneeling next to her in the brush. He wouldn't let her go.

He'd wanted this motherfucker to die hard, and he was dying extremely hard.

But he didn't think he could be the one to finally end it. He shook his head. Hap regarded him thoughtfully for several spine-chilling seconds, then he walked up to him and raised his hand. Abel mastered the urge to flinch away.

Hap put his hand on Abel's shoulder. "No shame in it. You better be ready to kill when a brother's on the line. You ever back down and leave a brother hanging, I will put a bullet between your eyes and not think twice. But there's no shame in choosing not to kill, when there is a choice. That's why there's men like me."

Hap pulled his rubber gloves off and walked over to his kutte. He took a pack of smokes out; there was a matchbook in the cellophane. He lit a smoke and took a long drag. Abel's dad and Chibs both picked up fire extinguishers.

*Oh, shit.* He'd heard that Hap had a thing with fire. Legend said he used it for personal kills.

Hap walked over to Dolan's limp but conscious body and set the end of his cigarette on the exposed edge of the gasoline-soaked rag in Dolan's mouth. Tig turned and walked away.

It was over pretty quick after that. Horrible, but quick.

With the nine of them working, the barn was cleaned up and the body prepped for disposal in record time. Butch and Pep were on disposal. Tig, Chibs, and Abel's dad were headed back to Charming. Harlon and Cade back to Fresno. They all said their goodbyes outside the barn, then Hap and Abel rode back to Fresno General to be with Hope. They stopped at a gas station on the way to wash up more thoroughly.

When they got to Hope's room, Hap's face changed completely. The killer was gone, replaced by the father. He smiled and kissed his daughter on the forehead. "Hey, midge. How you feelin'?"

She smiled up at him. She was so damn pretty. "Hi, Daddy. I'm good. A little sore. Itchy. Mostly hungry. You promised to smuggle me in some Indian food."

"You got it. What's that pink shit I'll eat?"

"Tandoori chicken. I want murg makhani and samosas. Abel?"

She knew what they'd done. Or at least that they'd killed. She took it with a complete lack of drama, as if they'd been out shopping for a lawn mower. There was something beautiful and sexy about that.

A little unnerving, too.

## CHAPTER 21: Happy

The Sons sat around the table as Jax described the brewing situation.

“That’s two drive-bys in Charming within a month. Random civilian targets. Same description—white or light grey van, shooters with automatic rifles, probably AKs. Roosevelt is leaning on us, thinks this is our beef. I think he’s right. I think one of the Oakland crews finally looked up from their war and noticed that the Irish weren’t waiting around anymore. I’m thinking Lin; he was the connection point for the guns.”

Hap spoke up. “We got enough to put it on him?”

Jax shook his head. “Not yet. But we need to keep an eye out. All these years, we’ve managed to keep most of our shit out of town. Damn sure innocents have never been targets. Now they are, so we come down hard as soon as we know.” He nodded toward the end of the table. “Pep, I need you trying to get some solid intel on the van. Hap, what do you think of grabbing one of Lin’s guys, asking some questions?”

Hap shook his head. “Not yet. We need to have some meat on the hook. If Pep finds something, then. And it should be Phil who does the askin’.”

Jax’s eyebrows went up at that. “You sure, brother? Job this big?”

Hap was sure. It was time to pass the torch entirely. “Yeah.” He looked at Phil. “You’re up for it, right, brother?”

Phil leaned in and put his elbows on the carved table. “You know I am, Hap.”

Hap nodded approvingly. “We’ll talk.”

“Okay,” Jax continued. “Meantime, we step up our presence on the streets, keep our eyes peeled. Last piece of business—we ready to think about patching Kev? He’s coming up on do or die time, and we’ve never even brought him to a vote. Freddy’s not comin’ back to his seat, we all know that. We’re gonna need to fill it.”

The table was quiet for a moment, thinking of Freddy, who had been transferred to a long-term care facility in Stockton in what the doctors called a “permanent vegetative state.” Their brother was gone; they just couldn’t give him a funeral.

Then Jax asked again, “Thoughts about Kev?”

Tig leaned forward, but Jax put his hand up. “Man, you always say the same thing. ‘Too soft, not ready.’ Every fucking Prospect for thirty-plus years. Including almost everyone at this table. We all know you hate Prospects. Got something different to say?”

Tig sat back with a shrug, and the table broke into gales of laughter, breaking the mood set by their thoughts of Freddy. Jax looked around. “Anybody else?”

Butch spoke up. One of the quietest Sons, he wasn’t one to offer up a first opinion, so everybody’s ears perked up. “He ain’t got it, boss. Good guy, great to have around, but no Son. He ain’t got the stomach for it. Seems like a strong stomach’s about to get real important.”

The table was quiet. Hap agreed with Butch. Kevin was nearing 30, but he was still a kid in too many ways. Sweet. Willing, but too fucking sweet. It was time to cut him loose. Jax finally spoke again. “Okay. We’ll vote him next Friday. We need to grease the skids for him some in the meantime. And be thinking about a hangaround or two we can bring up. Alright, Hap needs to get out of here, so if there’s nothing else?” He gaveled the meeting closed.

Before anybody got up, Joey asked, “S’up, Hap?”

“Hope’s got her last doctor appointment, getting the cast off today.”

“‘Bout fucking time—how long’s it been?”

“Just over two months. She’s driving me fucking crazy about it.”

“You gonna let her get back on a bike?”

The table went quiet at Joey’s question, as the guys all looked from Hap to Abel. Hap liked making Romeo squirm, so he simply looked steadily at him and didn’t answer. He let the room file out with the question hanging.

Truth was, Hap didn’t know what he was going to do about his daughter’s determination to have her own bike. For the moment, she didn’t have enough saved to buy one on her own, and Abel’s sparkly red bobber was out of commission. She didn’t have her license yet, either. So he still had some time to figure that out. Not much, though, now that she’d have both legs working right again.

The past two months had been . . . good. Better, anyway. Hope was home, all moved back in. Having her there had brought the house back from the shadows. Vivian was still everywhere, as if she were only away on a trip; neither Hope nor he had expressed any interest in changing anything about the house that would lift her presence from it. But Hap was learning to feel her presence as something that made the house fuller rather than emptier. He was learning to live married to a memory. The ache was always there, and sometimes it flared into pain and almost knocked him flat, but each day was fractionally easier than the day before.

She'd been dead six months. It had taken Hap six months to stop waiting to join her. He'd never stop missing her, but he had begun to feel like he could deal, maybe find some measure of peace.

Things with Hope were almost normal again. She'd needed care and attention when he first brought her back from the hospital, and Hap thought they'd done a lot of relationship repairs as he'd tended to her. Didn't hurt at all that she was a captive audience, but she'd also been open and receptive to his remorse.

They'd sat down with Frank almost as soon as they were back from Fresno. It was clear that Hope was still deeply uncomfortable and sad about what had happened between him and Frank, and the idea that a baby might be the result of it had her badly rattled. But she forgave them. She'd said that feeling bad about what they'd done was making her feel bad when she remembered her mom, and she didn't want that tainting her memories, so she forgave them. It was a sublimely Vivian thing to do, to just let go of negativity like it was vapor. He hadn't known Hope was capable of it.

They'd also agreed that Frank's decision was the right one. The baby would be known as Juice's, and the three of them would take any doubt that it was true with them to their graves. They would maintain the close familial relationship they already had. Hap had some trouble with that. For Frank and Hope, it had been a clear and obvious decision, better in every regard. For Hap it had not. He felt instinctively certain the baby was his, and the thought of denying that made his skin crawl, even as the thought of making a child with anyone other than Vivian did the same. But the women had convinced him. Had threatened him, in fact—which was both amusing and effective. And he had promised to abide by the agreement.

He kept his promises. Didn't mean he felt good about this one.

-oOo-

Hope pouted the whole way home from the hospital. They'd put her in a soft boot for two more weeks. The doctor had told her it was a possibility, but she'd chosen not to hear that, and had expected to be free. So she sat in the bitch seat of Vivian's cage in full teenager mode, arms crossed and everything, staring out the window. Hap had tried to get her to talk once. He was content with silence, so when he got a bitchy retort from her, he left her to her temper.

Truthfully, he was in a pretty good mood the whole drive. There was something wonderfully normal about driving with a temperamental teen in the car that made him feel like life was going to be okay. The thought even occurred to him that he could teach Hope to drive the SUV they were in, maybe give it to her. It was Vivian's. He thought about bringing that up, but decided he was enjoying her tantrum too much to do something to chase it off.

Teaching her to drive the SUV might have the added bonus of staving off this whole fucking bike fight. He did *not* want his girl riding on her own. Especially not after what happened. But she was determined, and he was fully aware he was going to lose eventually. The thought of her on the road made his nerves raw. In this big cage, he could have some measure of confidence that she'd be safe. Obviously, he could have no such confidence when she was alone on a Harley.

When they got home, she gimped back to her mother's music room in a huff. Hap had shown her Vivian's videos shortly after she moved back, and she'd been in the music room lot since, playing guitar. She had never had the patience to become as good as her mom, but she seemed to have found a store of it now.

She'd asked if she could play the Martin, but Hap hadn't been able to say yes. She'd been disappointed, and he'd felt guilty, but he hadn't been able to relent. He needed the Martin with him. Didn't know why. He hadn't taken it out of its case since he'd brought it into the house. But he needed it with him.

They'd only had one real fight since Hope had moved back home. When he mentioned getting ready for school, and she announced she wasn't going back, they'd had an old-fashioned blow-out. She'd won. He was beginning to understand that he had no control over her whatsoever. He wasn't sure whether it was because he'd bailed on her and had lost so much ground, or because any control he'd ever had had been an illusion created by Vivian's master parenting, and his girls had just been managing him the whole time, but he was trying to think of one single disagreement he'd had the edge in, and he came up blank.

She wasn't going to finish high school. Smartest kid in her grade—fuck, in the *school*—and she was dropping out. He'd tried to persuade her that she was narrowing her options and she was too young to do that. But he didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, and she damn well knew it. He'd dropped out—which she'd pointed out. He'd wanted the outlaw life—she'd pointed out that she didn't fit anywhere else. When he pushed the point anyway, insisting she didn't know yet where she'd fit, she'd just said no.

What was he going to do? Shove her in a locker at the high school?

When he complained that he wanted her to be more than just an old lady, she'd asked him why he thought that was all she'd be. His answer was that there was nowhere else for her in the life.

She'd laughed.

But her plans for her future were too nebulous for Hap's taste. When he'd asked her, "then what?", she'd shrugged. He did not want her aimless. Vivian would fucking kill him. So his new focus was to get her to find something, school or not, that interested her. He could not possibly let his daughter hook herself to Abel Teller at the age of 17 and just stall out in his short shadow. Absolutely fucking not. He was coming to terms with

the idea that they were now—for now—a couple, but he would not see her promise gutter out before it had even caught fire.

## CHAPTER 22: Hope

Hope was feeling morose, sitting on the music room couch, plucking at her little Fender acoustic. She liked being out here these days. It felt like her mom was in the room, and that didn't hurt like it used to. Now it felt companionable. She'd watched the video her mom had made for her, and all the videos of her childhood, over and over. Mostly, though, she played her mom's song list. She was trying to learn to play them herself, but it was hard going. Her mom had insisted she read music. Tabs were easier, but her mom hadn't left her the tabs. Of course. Just the sheet music, and her own recordings. Hope supposed she could make the tabs, but she'd have to read the music to do it—and anyway, this is what her mother wanted.

She wasn't morose thinking about her mom. She was morose thinking about her life. Stuck in a stupid soft cast, two more weeks before she could be free. At least the crutches were gone, though. Those had sucked. Working on crutches had sucked big time.

Her life was not what she thought it would be. Well, no, that wasn't right. She'd hadn't really had a chance to think about what it would be like. But she knew her vision of a future had had her mom in it, and didn't have the weird family thing that was happening with Frank and her dad now. She was working on being okay with everything. She wished Frank would find out one way or another. Hope thought it would be a relief to find out that the baby really was Juice's. But she guessed it wouldn't really change what had happened, and she didn't want to find out that it was really her dad's.

No, this wasn't what she'd wanted her life to be like.

Things were going okay with him, though. He was really trying, and her mom had reminded her how hard it was for him. It was kinda cute, even. Also incredibly annoying. He'd always been present and involved—except when he was in prison—but before, there had been things that were his job and things that were her mom's job. Now, after bailing entirely, he was making up by trying to do both. He was having trouble seeing that she didn't need him to be both parents. She didn't really need him to be a parent at all anymore. She was done. Grown. Not 18 yet, but still grown. He didn't see it that way. She didn't want him to have the say he wanted to have. She wanted her daddy, but she didn't want that.

Her mom had told her to trust herself, not let anybody tell her what she knew. Hope wondered if that advice was supposed to include her dad. Because he had a lot of things he wanted to tell her.

He was on her to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. But she felt like she was already doing it—or enough, anyway. She liked working at Frank's shop. She liked living in Charming—in this house. She wanted a bike. She'd probably want a place of her own eventually. She liked hanging with her family at the clubhouse. She was getting to like hanging at Frank's again, too.

With the exceptions that her mom was far too absent and Frank a bit too present, Hope already had the life she wanted. She couldn't make her dad see it, though.

"Hey, gimp." She looked up to see Abel leaning in the doorway.

"Hey! Did I know you were coming over?"

"Nope. Was out delivering something for the club. I've got the van. Thought I'd surprise you, see if you wanted to get somethin' to eat."

He was still in the doorway. Hope waved him over. "Sure. Come here."

"Nope. Your dad's here. He knows I'm here. He's probably watching out a window. You come here."

"Seriously? Abel, he knows we"—she still had trouble figuring out a way to say it that didn't sound lame or weird—"sleep together." Abel said *fuck* but she hadn't come around to saying it that way. She only said *fuck* when she was pissed off. Seemed a weird word to use to describe what they did. But *sleep together* wasn't right, either. They hadn't actually done that, not literally. That would be nice, actually, but her father's head would explode if she stayed out all night.

Her broken leg had put a serious crimp in their chances to see each other, since Abel's only vehicle was his bike. They'd spent most of their time together in her living room, playing video games or watching TV. They'd only had sex twice in two months, both times hurried affairs with most of their clothes on that had been . . . okay. Come to think of it, they'd only had sex once that had been anything like leisurely—their first time, in his bedroom. Even then, they been interrupted after the fact. It was getting frustrating, now that Hope understood what the fuss was about.

And the thought had certainly occurred to her that Abel was going a very long time without sex. Or he wasn't. She hadn't brought it up. She didn't want to know.

"Whatever. I'm not in there alone with you. One beating like that was plenty, thank you very much." If anything, Abel seemed *more* afraid of her dad since they'd come to terms, not less. Weird.

Fine. She put her guitar away and went to him. He gave her a chaste kiss and took her hand.

-oOo-

Abel helped her into the club van and drove off in the direction of Galt. Hope couldn't think of any good place to eat in that direction. "Where are we eating?"

The look he gave her was weird. Hope couldn't read it. He didn't answer right away, instead fiddling with the stereo until he had it on a hard rock station. Finally, he smiled and said, "Would you be pissed if we just stopped at In-N-Out and got drive-thru burgers? I kind of have an idea."

Burgers were fine with her. "That's okay. But what's your idea?"

He cleared his throat. "I know a quiet place. We can pull off and eat and . . . have some time alone together." He glanced away from the road to check her reaction. "The back seats fold down together to almost make like a bed."

Hope smiled. "Abel, did you take me out to have sex in the club van?"

"I know doing it in the van is lame as hell, but damn, babe. Getting you alone is hard." He grinned. "I'm going crazy."

It occurred to her again to wonder, and suddenly she really did want to know. She didn't know if she could trust his answer, though. The truth was that he hadn't given her any reason not to trust him since the day he'd given her her first riding lesson. He'd been good to her all this time—just about three months. But there was a lot they didn't talk about.

Part of that was because they'd grown up together. They were part of the same family. The things she figured most people talked about when they were growing closer to another person were things she and Abel already shared. They had the same family. They'd spent every holiday of her life together. Without any living grandparents of her own, she'd grown up calling Abel's grandmother Grandma Gemma. They called the same men uncle—or they had. Abel now called those men brother.

That should make trust easier, she supposed. But it didn't. She wasn't even sure her reserve was still because he'd been such a jerk to her most of her life. She didn't know what was holding her back. She really did like him. She was really attracted to him—even more now that they were physical together. He was handsome and had a great body. He had a smile that made her stomach do weird things. He was nice to her all the time, and she felt better when she was with him than with anybody else—even now, when she and her father were fixing things and she felt comfortable again with Frank.

He'd talked about his problems with his parents and his brother, and a lot of that had been stuff she hadn't known. But she hadn't talked to him in the same way. The wall around the secret she shared with her dad and Frank seemed to close everything else in her off, too. She didn't know if Abel was trustworthy, because she hadn't tried to trust him yet.

So here, riding toward Galt on the dark highway, Guns N' Roses playing on the stereo, she had a question, the answer for which would start to expose the degree of trust between them. Hope didn't know how relationships were supposed to work, and she didn't really have anybody to ask. Was there supposed to be some explicit kind of

definition, or were they just supposed to know intuitively? She hadn't tried to get him to define what they since the night of their first time, when he'd resisted. As far as either of them had said, they were still *hanging out*. They spent a lot of time doing that, though—hanging out. They spent most of their free time together. He called her *babe* all the time. He took care of her.

But she knew his reputation. She'd seen him a little bit at the clubhouse with the girls there. She knew he had sex a lot, with a lot of different girls. They'd only had sex four times in three months. One of those times had been interrupted by a bad beating.

Finally, she just asked. "Abel, are you sleeping with other girls?"

He laughed harshly, obviously not expecting the question. "What?"

She felt totally calm about it. She wasn't even sure she'd be angry if he said yes. "We haven't been fooling around much since my accident. We haven't fooled around much at all. I know you're used to more. I'm wondering if you're having sex someplace else."

He didn't answer. Instead, he pulled off at the next exit and parked along a side street. He shut off the engine, the sound in the van dropping suddenly as the stereo went off. He turned in his bucket seat to face her. It was dark in the van, only the streetlights around them brightening the gloom, but Hope could tell he looked pissed.

He rested his left arm on the steering wheel, his right over the headrest of his seat. "Okay, Hope. It's been awhile since we talked about this. How about instead of me answering your question, you answer mine. Time for you to go out on a limb for a change. What do you want?"

"I don't know what you're asking."

"Sure you do."

But she didn't. Or she didn't think she did. Was he asking if she wanted to have sex? Or to be more to each other—but more, like what? Was he asking if she knew what she wanted with her *life*? She *didn't* know what he was asking. So she didn't answer. She looked out the side window at the traffic moving past on the highway they'd just been on.

He sighed. "Fuck. I keep telling myself that five and a half years isn't that much difference. But you're a lot younger than I am, Hope. It's not the age difference. It's that you haven't *done* anything. I think that should matter more to me. But I . . ."

He didn't finish. For several uncomfortable seconds, the van was heavily quiet. Then Abel spoke up again, his voice low. "I'm asking what you want with me. I'm asking how you feel about me. Because, Hope, I've had some time to think about this. And I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you."

She turned quickly, surprised. He met her eyes, and she could see the question in them. But she didn't know how to answer. She didn't know what it would feel like to love someone, not like that. Familial love she understood. Romantic love, though?

“Hope, please say something.”

Considering her words carefully, trying to understand her answer as she gave it, trying to be true, she said. “Abel—I want to be with you. Like, as a couple. I'm happiest with you. Since we started being together, a lot of the time you've been the only good thing happening. But I don't know how to know the rest. I don't know what that kind of love would even feel like.”

She stopped and looked at him, worried that she'd hurt him. But he gave her a little smile. “Okay. Fair enough.”

She thought about what the answer she'd given him meant to the question she'd asked which started all this. “I don't think I'd like it if you slept with anybody else. I know I wouldn't like it if you lied about it.”

He smiled. “Okay, I won't lie. I got head when I was up in Tacoma last month. That's it since your accident—since we started having sex. And that was on a run, so it's not supposed to count.”

“What do you mean?” She didn't feel much reaction to that confession. She didn't like it, but it didn't make her mad. But then she got an image of her head of Abel in the position she'd seen Uncle Tig in once when she'd come into the clubhouse unexpectedly—leaning back on one of the couches, a cigarette between his lips, some woman on her knees between his legs, her head bobbing. She didn't like the thought of that being Abel *at all*.

“Didn't your dad—no, I guess not. There's a deal: what happens on a run stays on a run. It means Sons don't bring that stuff around their women, and their women don't ask what happened while they were away.”

If her parents had had that arrangement, she hadn't known about it. But she couldn't imagine that they had. Even now, even after Frank, she couldn't believe her father had been with anybody but her mom, not while she was alive, not even on a run. But she wasn't sure how she felt about it herself. This was all a much bigger conversation than she thought they would have. “Am I your ‘*woman*’?” She made air quotes, because that just sounded weird.

“You're my girl. At least, I think of you like that, and it would be cool if you did, too. Hope, I don't want to be with anybody but you. Even when we can't have sex. I'd pretty much just rather go without—and not just because half my brothers would tear out my spleen if I was with anybody else.” He reached over and put his hand on her cheek. “What I want is to be with you.”

She believed. She believed all of it. If he was lying, then she'd deal with that later. She smiled. "Did you put blankets in here, at least?"

His grin was wide and beaming, and her stomach flipped over, as it always did. "I did—and a couple of pillows. And a *bunch* of condoms." He started the car and pulled away from the curb. "Let's get some burgers and have ourselves a little sex picnic. You good with that, babe?"

She smiled, relieved that they'd gotten through that conversation in one piece. "Sounds cool." He grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

-oOo-

The place Abel took them to, after they'd picked up their In-N-Out burgers, was really pretty. They were parked off the road, surrounded by trees, quiet and secluded. Hope laughed a little, thinking that it was the perfect place for a slasher movie monster to sneak up on them and murder them horribly.

"What's funny?" Abel was sitting facing her on the back seats, which he'd folded flat—they did make a pretty decent bed. He'd finished his burger and was sipping root beer from a straw.

"Just wondering if we have to worry about some horror movie psycho killer out here."

He laughed, too. "Don't worry, babe. I'll protect you."

Hope was about done with her burger and fries, but as she started to wrap up what she hadn't eaten, Abel stopped her: "You gonna finish that?" She rolled her eyes and handed it over. While he ate, she lay back on the makeshift bed and looked out the side window. It was blacked out, so her view was obscured, but she could see the pine trees moving in the wind. Early fall. It was her favorite time of year. Her mom's, too.

Lost in melancholy thoughts, she heard a rustle of paper, and then Abel was lying next to her, hovering over her. "Hey—where'd you get off to?"

She focused back in and looked up at him. The light was dim—dimmer than before, when they were parked on the side road. Just moonlight, now. But she could still see him, his eyes glimmering a little. She liked the way he looked at her. His ponytail was hanging over his shoulder; she put her hand around it.

"Thinking about my mom. I miss her." She winced as soon as she said it. He wouldn't want her to talk about her dead mother here. He wanted to have sex. So did she. It was stupid to bring her mom up now. "Sorry. Never mind."

But he turned a little, resting more on his side, propped on his elbow. "Your mom was awesome. I was always jealous of you. Still am, I guess, a little."

That was maybe the weirdest thing he'd ever said to her. He was jealous because her mom was dead? She turned to her side, facing him. "Why?"

He combed his fingers through her hair. "The way your mom was with you. With everybody, really. She was so fuckin' cool. My mom's always had a big stick up her ass. Everything has to be right, or she freaks out. Your mom just . . . took things like they came. And she talked to you like you were just another person. Even when you were pretty little. My mom still talks to me like I'm the kid she had to pick up early from school because I got suspended. Maybe it's because I'm not really hers. Never have figured out how to make her be okay with me. Your mom . . . fuck, a lot of times I felt like *she* liked me better than mine did, even though I was a jerk."

He shook his head. "That was fuckin' whiny. Sorry. It's just—you were lucky. I know you're not now, and it sucks so bad she's gone. But you were lucky."

Hope only nodded. She couldn't speak, because she was fighting the deluge of tears roaring up her throat. And then the dam broke. God! She hated crying in front of anyone—him most of all—and these tears went deep. She started to push away from him, to sit up, to go sit in the front or something, try to get control of herself. But he wouldn't let her go. He pulled her close, tucked her head under his chin and just held her.

She felt warm and protected, surrounded by the strength of him. Like the night in the music room, she understood that he was what she needed. She was pushing under his t-shirt, trying to get to his bare skin, before her tears had even abated. He stopped her, not pushing her away, but making her hold for a second, and he kissed her. The kiss felt different—deeper, but not physically. Like something was passing between them. It made her feel a little dizzy. And then he was tearing at her clothes, too. Like all the Sons, he didn't wear his kutte when he drove, so there was only a black t-shirt between Hope and his beautiful, cut chest. She pulled it up and he took it the rest of the way, grinning down at her.

"Fuck, babe. I want to feel you." Put his hands on the soft cast around her leg. "Okay to take this off?"

"Yes! Please get that stupid thing off me!" Chuckling, he did. They undressed each other frantically. Hope usually felt awkward when Abel undressed her, but not this time. She felt nearly desperate to be naked with him. The van was getting a little cold, but she didn't care. She wanted to be naked.

When they finally were, she grabbed his shoulders and tried to pull him down on top of her. He locked his arms and held back. "Hold up, babe. Hold up."

"What?" She wanted him to make her feel the things she knew he could make her feel.

“We don’t have to rush, Hope. We can take our time.” He scooted down and lay on her, putting his hands around her breasts. He drew one into his mouth and sucked on it gently. She felt it down to her toes. Okay, okay. No rush. She moaned and relaxed into the sensations he was making.

He sucked her breasts for a long time, going back and forth between them, massaging them with his hands, tweaking them with his fingers. He’d never spent so much time with them before, and Hope was amazed at how many different ways they could feel good. She was feeling squirmy and impatient, unable to hold still and relax any longer, unable to stay quiet, but not wanting him to stop. Then his hand slid between them, between her legs, and pressed hard to her mound.

He looked up at her, his eyes intense. “Jesus Christ, babe. Oh, fuck. You’re dripping wet. It’s so sexy.” He groaned. “I—fuck, I don’t think I can wait.”

“Don’t. He flinched at that and furrowed his brow, and she realized she needed to clarify. With a little laugh, she said, “Don’t wait. Go inside me.”

He made a growly sound and reached down for a condom, where he’d dropped them on the floor. “I want to eat you out. I want to teach you to give me head. I want—fuck, there’s so much I want to do with you. We need time. I need to get my own fucking place.” As he talked, he rolled the condom on. She’d been listening. It hadn’t really occurred to her yet to do what they were doing any other way. She knew there were lots of ways, of course. But for obvious reasons, she’d followed his lead completely.

When he shifted over her again, grabbing her leg to spread her wide, she stopped him. “Wait.” He whimpered a little, but stopped.

“What’s up, babe?”

She felt shy, but she went for it. “Can we try it a different way? Could you show me what to do if I’m on top?”

His eyes went wide, and for a second, Hope thought she’d said something she should be embarrassed about. Then he smiled. “Jesus. I’m so hot for you I can’t stand it. Yeah. Yeah, I could definitely show you that.” He pulled her to sitting and rolled to lie down next to her. He was panting. “Fuck, Hope. Fuck.”

Guiding her with his hands on her arms, he said, “Straddle me.” She did. With one hand, he held himself steady; the other hand he put on her hip to guide her. “Okay, just sit down, slowly. Ah, fuck. Yeah, babe. Just. Like. That.”

She sat down on his hips, stunned by what she felt. He was really deep inside her, deeper than ever, and so hard. It didn’t hurt at all. It just felt totally amazing. She didn’t know what to do now, but the feeling was so very good that she couldn’t hold still. She flexed her hips, and he moved inside her. They both gasped.

“You are a natural, babe. Move your hips just like that. As much as you want. We’ll start—*ah, yeah!*—start with that.” He put his hands on her hips and guided her a little, but she had the hang of it right away. Wow, it felt so good. Wow. Just wow. He moved his hands to her breasts and tweaked at her nipples, pinching gently. It made her need to move faster, and she was starting to make those sick puppy noises she couldn’t seem to control.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. This is good, babe. You feel so good. Fuck. I can’t—.” He moved one hand from her breast to between her legs, and she felt his thumb pressing hard, right on that spot—her clit, she knew what it was, it just felt weird to think it—that made everything a thousand times more intense. All of a sudden, she didn’t feel like she could control anything; her hips were moving so fast she’d lost all sense of rhythm. It felt so good, so good, so good. She put her hands on his chest and leaned down, her body driving hard on his, searching for something.

And then she found it, and she cried out, embarrassingly loudly. She felt herself squeezing around him as pleasure exploded through her all the way to her fingers and toes. She was rigid and still for a long time, the pleasure rolling through her in waves, and then she realized Abel was chanting, “Don’t stop, don’t stop, fuck, don’t stop.” He was thrusting up into her strongly. That felt good, too.

She shook off her daze and sat back up straight, flexing her hips on him again until his head came up, his eyes squinched tight, and he grunted, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. YEAH, FUCK YEAH!” When he dropped his head back to the seat, she relaxed, too, lying on him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

“Yep,” he gasped. “Definitely need to get my own place.”

Hope felt happy. And then she felt guilty. It was too soon to feel happy.

## CHAPTER 23: Abel

Hope shivered a little, lying on top of him, so Abel rolled and gently laid her on the seat next to him, pulling out of her as he did. He pulled off the condom and tied it off. Then he sat up, dropped the condom on the floor of the van and grabbed a blanket, shaking it out over them. He reached back down for the pillows, and they both shifted around so he could put them under their heads. When he settled back down, Hope snuggled close against him with a little purr.

They lay together quietly for a long time, Hope rubbing soft circles on his belly with her hand. It felt great, and Abel relaxed into her touch, combing his fingers through the long curls of her wild, gorgeous hair. He was thinking, his brain moving quickly. Several times he almost said something, started a conversation, but it felt so good to simply lie here with her, the full length her bare body pressed along his equally bare side, that he didn't want to do anything that might change it.

After awhile, he felt the weight of her body change slightly, and her hand stopped moving. He put his hand on hers and got no reaction from her. She'd fallen asleep. Somehow, that felt romantic to him. Hope sleeping with her head on his chest.

Romantic. Abel hadn't thought he was romantic. But Hope made him feel all sorts of weird feelings. It was dumb. He knew it was dumb. She was a kid. She was naïve as anything, and she had a damn *curfew*. The way he felt about her stunned him.

They'd been together in one way or another for about three months, almost four, and for the last two he'd been practically celibate. Without ever agreeing to be. It didn't make sense at all. Sure, once the Sons, especially the older Sons, knew that he and Hope were together, getting any play at the clubhouse would have been damn tricky, but he didn't *want* it. He looked at the 'Eaters, all made up and world weary, and they looked like used-up crack whores compared to Hope.

He'd gotten head in Tacoma because he was drunk off his ass and the girl had been all over him all night. It had been fine; she was good at it, and he'd come hard, but then he'd looked down and had seen this girl smiling up at him liked she loved having his jizz on her face, this stranger whose name he didn't know or care to know, and he'd felt ...disgusted.

He'd *loved* the fact that he could fuck just about any girl he laid eyes on, that he didn't need to bother with small talk or sweet talk or any of it. He'd *loved* being able to crook a finger and have a chick on his dick a minute later, and have her be gone a minute after she'd gotten him off. Since he was fifteen. That was a perk of being a Son. Chicks let him do whatever he wanted. Now, he'd rather be playing fucking video games with Hope?

But it was true. He was in love with her. He thought maybe that had started even before they'd been spending time alone together. She'd fascinated him for years. He'd figured that was just because she was so hot, but now he wondered if it hadn't been something

more starting in him. But from the first time she started to pay him some attention back, he'd felt careful of her. Protective, but something more than that. Like he wanted to take care of her.

When she'd gotten hurt, and he'd felt frantic and sick, he'd known. He loved her. Which, as it turned out, sucked at least as often as it didn't. Like tonight, when he'd told her, and she hadn't said it back. That had really, really sucked. He'd felt it like a physical pain. But he thought he'd covered pretty well. Plus, he got it. He did. She hadn't said she didn't love him. She'd said she didn't know. She had no experience with anything they were doing. She'd had an incredibly fucked up year, with her mom getting sick and dying and Hap bailing on her, and then Juice dying—

Shit, it had been a *really* bad year. Ten months, anyway.

Abel's heart felt sore, and he shifted slowly so that he could see Hope's face. She stirred a little, but she was well asleep. He knew there was trust in her ability to sleep on him like this, naked in the back of the van, parked out in the middle of the woods. There was love in her trust. She might not know that, but he did. There was love in the way she touched him, the way she let him touch her—the way she trusted him to fuck her.

No. He didn't think that's what they were doing. Not fucking. Hope didn't like to say it that way. She said "fooling around" or "sleeping together." He grinned when he realized that that's what she was doing now. Sleeping with him.

Abel settled in, tucking Hope's head under his chin, and let himself relax and enjoy the moment. He closed his eyes for only a couple of minutes.

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His ass was absolutely freezing. Like a block of ice. He reached sleepily for the blanket, but only found the edge, lying on his thigh. He opened his eyes and saw Hope, curled snugly against his chest, wrapped up in most of the blanket like a big, blue burrito. He smiled. She was a blanket hog.

Then he realized he could see the light blue blanket clearly, because the van was bright with sunlight.

Holy God. They'd spent the night in the woods. He'd kept Hope out all night. No call. No word.

He was going to die today. Happy would simply put his hand through his ribcage and pull out his heart.

"Hope! Babe, wake up!" He shook her shoulder, maybe a little roughly, but he was panicking.

She opened her eyes, looking petulant. But that look passed quickly, replaced by understanding. “Oh, no!”

“Yeah, babe. We gotta get out of here. I’m thinking Canada.”

“Abel, I can’t—”

He stopped her with a hand on her cheek. “Joking. Mostly. But fuck.”

“Yeah. Fuck.”

They scrambled to get dressed. Once he got his jeans on, Abel checked his phones, both of which he’d put on silent—he was going to hear about that, assuming he survived to get reamed for it. Never put the prepay on silent, never turn it off. But he’d wanted finally to be able to be with Hope without being disturbed.

Five calls on his registered phone, 17 on his prepay. Twelve voice mails on the prepay, only one on the registered. Most of them were Hap. His dad had made the last calls on both phones. Oh, he was so fucked. He didn’t need to listen to any of them to know that.

When Hope was dressed, she called her dad. Abel sat and listened, every muscle and tendon in his entire body rigid, remembering the last time he’d been on the receiving end of Happy’s wrath.

“Hi, Daddy ... I’m okay ... No, it’s fine ... We fell asleep ... Um, out near Galt, I think ... No, Daddy—Daddy, listen. I’m coming home now. I didn’t mean to scare you; I didn’t mean to stay out all night. I’m really sorry ... Daddy, stop. I mean it. I’m not coming home if you don’t stop that ... It’s not his fault. ... I know, Daddy. I know. I’m so sorry. ... Okay. Stay there. We’ll go straight there now. ... Daddy, stay there, please. ... Okay.”

She ended the call and turned to Abel, looking wide-eyed and freaked out. “It’s not gonna be fun. He’s losing his shit. He’s at your house. We need to go there. It’s better if we go there. Your parents are there. I’m really sorry he’s like this.”

“It is my fault. I should have woken you up. But I liked it, being with you like that.” He laughed, trying to make light of the acidic feeling in his gut. “As last wishes go, it was a pretty good one.”

She smiled a little. “I liked it, too. But don’t joke. It won’t be that bad. Your parents are there.”

Yeah, that assumed his parents would get in Hap’s way.

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Hap was out the front door and coming across the lawn as Abel pulled the van into the driveway. He stalked in front of the van to the passenger side, tore open the door, and grabbed Hope, pulling her out before she could do more than squeak.

He just held her. For a long time, he just held her, her feet off the ground. Abel got out of the van and, not sure what to do, resisting the urge to run into the house, he stood at the front of the van and decided to deal with Hap straight on. He saw his parents standing on the porch, his dad's arm across his mom's chest, as if he were holding her back.

Hap set Hope on her feet. "Jesus Christ, midget, I was out of my head. You have to stop *doing* this shit!"

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I promise I didn't mean it. We fell asleep—it was an accident."

"Where were you and what were you doing that you could fall asleep?"

"Daddy, come on. You know we—"

"No! Don't you fuckin' say it."

He set her aside and came for Abel. Abel swallowed hard, but he stood his ground, even as that scary old motherfucker strode right up to him, snarling like a rabid dog, and grabbed him by the throat.

"I'm sorry, Hap," he struggled to get the words out, but they were clear.

"You and me, shithead. In the ring. We're first up tomorrow night. You stay the fuck away from her until then." He threw Abel to the ground. And no, Abel's dad didn't intervene. His parents both stood on the porch and watched.

Hope, did, though, or tried to. She was right behind her father, saying, "Daddy, no. You don't get to beat him. You don't get to decide what I do."

"Get in the truck, Hope. Do it the fuck now." There was a low, menacing tone in Hap's voice. Abel heard it; he'd never heard it aimed at Hope before. Hope heard it, too, and she clammed up and got in their truck.

Everything good Abel had with Hope had a nasty Happy chaser. That had to stop.

He had to win in the ring.

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Abel was fairly certain this was the first time that Hope had ever been to the clubhouse on a Friday night. Hap looked deeply unhappy about it, so there must have been a fight. When they got there—which meant that Hap had driven their SUV instead of riding,

since he wouldn't let Hope on a bike wearing that boot thing—Hope came straight to Abel. Hap glared furiously but didn't stop her.

When she got to Abel, she put her arm around him and kissed his cheek. She was making a hell of a statement, and a lot of people—Crow Eaters and Sons alike—were paying attention. Abel put his hand on her cheek and kissed her on the mouth, deeply, making a statement of his own. Then he put his arm around her and pulled her close.

Now. Now she was his girl. And she'd come to him.

“You don't have to do this, Abel. I can talk him down.” Hope pulled on his kutte a little, fretful.

“I do have to do it. I need him to give me some respect. I thought I had some after Fresno, but I guess that wasn't enough.”

“But—”

He felt a little hurt and pissed that she thought he'd back down. He was scared, sure. Her father had beaten the shit out of him twice already. But he wasn't a pussy. “Look, babe. We can't have your dad bustin' my ass every time we're together. That's gonna play out fast. I need to stand up to him some, or he's never gonna see me as anybody but the asshole kid who's fuckin' his little girl.” He kissed her forehead. “You don't have to watch, though. You should stay inside.”

She huffed and smacked him in the chest. “Fuck that! It's me you're fighting over. *Again*. I'm not sitting inside this time. I'm sick of everybody treating me like I can't deal with stuff. I deal with a lot of stuff. And I know more than people think.”

“Okay, okay,” he laughed, “I don't need two Lowmans whalin' on me tonight.”

Throughout that exchange, Hap had been glaring at them from the other side of the bar. Now he slammed his glass down and called out, “You ready, boy?”

As ready as he could be. He nodded and finished his beer. Hope took his hand and walked out with him. He saw Hap hate that. Good.

His dad ran the fight. Three rounds, two minutes each. Barehanded, as always. Abel climbed between the ropes and was surprised to see Tig waving him to a corner.

“Stick to body blows, kid. And try to make him use his left hand.”

Abel nodded, suspicious—or at least confused. “Why are you helping me?”

“Don’t get excited, kid. I’m helping him more. I’m sick of this shit. Hap needs some sense knocked into him. If he can’t beat you, that’ll get him thinking. Body blows, and make him work his left.”

He nodded again and turned around. Hap was glaring at Tig. Abel turned back to see Tig grinning. Then he met Hap in the middle of the ring.

He’d heard Tig’s advice, and he tried to follow it. But Hap was a mean motherfucker, and he was really pissed off. The guy was like 65 or something, but it didn’t matter. He had the body of a much younger man and the fury of not very sane one. Abel knew that Hap had some kind of trouble with his left hand, and he tried to force him to use that one, even intentionally letting it connect—like he really had a lot of control over that—but it didn’t seem to matter. If Hap felt pain, he didn’t show it.

Abel had gotten smarter and more experienced since that last time he’d met Happy in the ring, though, and he was keeping his feet. He’d ended up on the ropes a couple of times, but Hap couldn’t knock him down. He couldn’t get Happy down, either, but at least he was keeping his feet.

Tig had not hung around to help him between rounds. Butch was in his corner.

Finally, in the third round, Hap gave him an opening, and he went in for a combination to his chest and gut. Happy went to his knees.

Holy shit. He’d almost put Hap on the mat. Abel threw a cross to his jaw, thinking maybe he could finish it, but Hap caught Abel’s fist in his left hand and squeezed as he stood back up. That hand was swollen and looked awful, but it was squeezing the shit out of Abel’s, nonetheless. The look in Happy’s eyes was pure madness. And then a right jab caught Abel in the jaw, and he saw stars. He staggered back thinking only to keep his goddamn feet.

He did. And his father rang the bell. When Abel’s vision cleared, Happy was standing in the middle of the ring, staring at Abel, his chest heaving. Abel stood, holding his ground, staring right back. Then Hap advanced on him, and Abel was sure he was going to clock him again.

Instead, Hap embraced him, giving him a quick slap on the back. Then he turned and climbed out of the ring.

Abel was baffled.

Hope was right there waiting for him, throwing her arms around him when he came down from the ring. He hugged her back for a second, then pushed her off; he was fucking sore and needed some stitches, probably. At least a couple of butterflies.

“You did good—I think it’s okay now.” Hope was smiling, looking relieved.

Yeah, but he hadn't beaten him. He'd needed to beat him. He hadn't *been* beaten, though, either. He had no idea what a draw meant for what was between them.

They went into the clubhouse, and his mom patched him up. Chibs was working on Hap. While his mother cleaned his cuts and closed them up, Abel watched Hap, waiting to make eye contact. When Hap met his look, they both just stared. And then Happy nodded.

Abel thought maybe that was the best he was going to get under the circumstances.

By the time he was cleaned and bandaged, the Friday party was getting well underway. Abel wanted Hope out of there. He figured Happy would, too. Here was a moment to check for some clarity. He caught Hope's wrist and pulled her close. "I'm thinking I want to take the van again and take you home. You're gonna hate it here really soon."

Hope gave him a gaping stare. "Abel, the van? You're insane."

"Ask your dad, see what he says."

"No way. You must have a concussion."

He nodded toward her father. "Ask."

She stared at him for a few more seconds, then, with a roll of her eyes, she went and asked her dad. Abel saw him stare down at her, then at him—Abel made sure not to look away—and then back at Hope. He nodded and poured himself another glass of Jack.

Abel was pretty sure that meant he'd won the fight. The important part, anyway.

Hope came back, smiling, and he took her hand and led her out of the clubhouse to the van.

## CHAPTER 24—Frank

Frank was cooking. Nothing fancy, just some linguine alfredo and a tossed salad. She had some chicken breasts marinating in the fridge. Marinade turned out to be a pretty easy thing to do to meat. And Happy was going to do the grilling. Frank still hadn't figured out that whole process. Juice had loved to grill, and there was a huge steel thing on the patio that looked like some kind of alien mother ship. It intimidated the hell out of her.

Where meat was concerned, Frank had figured out marinades and sautéing. Oh, and the slow-cooker. That was a dandy appliance. Dump a bunch of raw crap in it in the morning, have stew in the evening. That kind of cooking she could handle. The rest of it continued to befuddle her, but she was learning.

Desi had stayed for three weeks and gotten her a good start. She'd taught her several recipes and explained which pots and pans to use for what. Tig had spent a startling amount of time at her house while Desi was here—including several nights—and had become one of Frank's taste test subjects. When Desi left, Frank had a stack of recipes she'd made at least once, all of which had been approved by Tig and Leo. Nora was a much tougher audience, of course.

Learning to cook while she was in the first trimester of a pregnancy had been a completely unlovely experience. Leo had become her royal taster, because nothing tasted right to her. Moreover, several key ingredients sent her flying to the bathroom just on sight. Eggs, for instance. Slimy things. Unfortunately, her kids loved eggs, and they had no one else to make them. She'd found herself puking into the sink a few times, but she'd stuck it out. She was moving out of that rough patch now, it seemed. So she was looking for her kitchen adventures to be somewhat less nauseating.

Frank could remember being self-sufficient. Or she thought she could, anyway. She'd lived on her own before she and Juice moved in together. But she'd always had a small life, in tiny studio apartments, and only herself and Smeagol, her cat, to take care of. Smeagol. She missed that cranky old guy.

Now she had two children, another on the way, and a huge damn house on 20 acres. She also had a business, with ten employees. The business she knew how to run. But she had come to understand that Juice had run their home. He'd done it subtly, smoothly, without her even realizing how little she'd been involved, but it had been Juice who cooked, who paid the household bills, who managed the maid service and the pool guy and the landscapers. Frank had worked, and she'd mothered, and she'd painted. Juice had taken care of everything else. He'd taken care of her.

Then she'd looked up one day, and the love of her life had disappeared and left behind a life she didn't even understand.

“You ready for me to grill, little girl? I’m gonna be out there in the dark, we don’t get started pretty soon.” Happy was standing at the counter, pulling barbecue tools out of a drawer.

“Yep. Hold on, I’ll get the chicken out of the fridge.” Frank pulled a glass dish of marinating chicken breasts from a low shelf. When she stood up again, she must have done so too quickly, because the room swam, and her knees buckled.

Happy caught her in his arms before she fell, and she managed to keep hold of the glass dish, the only casualty her B-52s t-shirt, which got sloshed with oily sauce as the dish rocked.

“Shit, little girl. You okay?” His arms still around her, he led her to sit. He took the glass dish from her and set it on the table, then squatted in front of her, looking worried.

She smiled at him. “I’m okay. I just straightened up too fast. Chill, dude.”

He didn’t look convinced. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Happy, I’m cooking. I’m surrounded by food.”

He said nothing, but raised his eyebrows at her. He knew her too fucking well. Frank had learned that she couldn’t eat while she was cooking. She even had trouble eating what she cooked. She didn’t know whether that was a permanent thing or a pregnancy thing, but Happy had obviously figured it out. She tried to think when she’d last eaten. Eating was not something Frank had ever focused on very much. Lunch? Maybe. She couldn’t remember.

She sighed. “Okay. I could use a granola bar or something, if you’re gonna be a pain about it.”

“No wonder you’re such a skinny little shit.” He gave her thighs an affectionate squeeze.

Before he could stand up, Hope came into the room and paused, looking at the two of them, Happy squatting at Frank’s chair, his hands on her thighs. She regarded the scene for a beat and then said, “Nora’s asking for a movie. Can I start one before dinner?”

Happy stood and went to the pantry, Frank assumed for a granola bar. She answered Hope, “Just a short one. We’re probably only half an hour from dinner.”

Hope nodded. “You got it,” she said, and then turned back toward the living room.

Frank hadn’t figured out what to do in moments like these. They occurred once in awhile. She and Happy had found their level ground again. They were okay. He was treating her as he always had—okay, he was more protective, taking more active care, but she was

sure that was because Juice was gone. He would have been the same even if there were no chance the baby she carried was his.

Yet when Hope came in on what were normal moments of affection and care between them, Frank always felt like they'd been caught somehow. Just a little shiver of guilt, precipitated, she thought, by the worry that Hope was reading more into what she saw than was really there. She didn't know how—or whether—to talk to her about it.

Happy brought her a granola bar, its wrapper already torn open, and handed it to her. She looked up, silently asking him, but he just shook his head and patted her shoulder. Okay; she'd let it go. He grabbed the barbecue tongs and the dish of chicken and went out to the patio. Frank ate her snack and then went back to work on her part of the meal, still thinking.

They sat together in the dining room and ate. Frank managed to convince Nora to eat the linguine, once she'd cut it up into bite-size pieces. She snubbed the chicken and the salad, but ate her weight in grapes. Frank decided to call it a win. Everybody else seemed pleased with the meal.

She looked around the table at what had become her very strange family. Her fatherless children. Her surrogate father. His motherless daughter. They were like their own island of misfit toys.

The conversation around the table had been mostly focused on Leo, who had recently discovered the pewter fantasy miniatures at Level Up and was learning the art of dry brushing. There was a box tucked on a shelf in the garage full of Juice's miniatures; Frank wondered whether she should get them down for Leo.

Somehow, Hap found a segue from that discussion to Hope's future. He was becoming quite literally obsessed with getting Hope to make a plan, and no amount of her resistance seemed dissuasive. "How about art school? You've got some real talent, midge, and I bet Frank could help you out." Frank wasn't sure she could be much help, not for school. Andre, her old professor, had retired. She could help her get in the door in the San Francisco art scene, of which she was still more or less a part, but she really wasn't good for much more than advice. So she kept quiet and watched Hope tense at her father's suggestion.

"Not now, Daddy." She shoved a hunk of chicken in her mouth. Frank and Hope weren't as close anymore as they'd once been, but they were making their way back, even if it was in fits and starts, and she knew what Hope was feeling now. Happy needed to back off. She understood why he was pushing, but he would have known not to before. When Vivian was alive, before he'd run, he would have understood that pushing Hope was the best way to get her to do the opposite of what he wanted.

But he pressed on, doggedly determined. "Midget, I just want you to find something that you want to do."

“I found it, Daddy. I keep telling you. I’m okay like I am.”

“You’re not always going to feel that way.”

“Then I’ll do something different *then*.”

“What if it’s too late?”

She shrugged and glowered at her plate.

Frank had an idea. “What about Paris? Desi would love to have you, and she’s a great guide. You could spend some time, figure things out.”

The look on Happy’s face chilled her. He’d never looked at her with such anger before. “No fucking way.”

Leo had been watching the exchange avidly. He was an intuitive, empathetic kid, so he knew keenly that tensions were high at the table. Seeing that his plate was basically clean, Frank reached over and brushed his hair back from his face. “You done, doodle? Why don’t you play in your room? You can leave your plate; I’ll clean it up.”

Leo hesitated, but he wasn’t a rebel. He got up and headed off to his room. Nora threw a grape after him and then went back to mashing them on the tray of her high chair.

Frank looked at Happy, who was scowling, his arms crossed. “Chill, dude. It was just an idea.”

Hope dropped her fork on her plate. “You know what would be cool? If people stopped having *ideas* about *my* life. I get to choose. I get to choose when I choose.” She turned to Frank. “I know that we’ve got this weird family thing here, and I’m trying to be cool with it, but I don’t want another mother. I have a mother. I don’t want her replaced. You don’t get to have ideas about my life unless I ask for them. I don’t want to go to fucking France.” Now she turned to her father. “And I don’t want to go to fucking art school. I hate school. I hated school from the first day, and I’m glad it’s over. I know you feel bad for leaving me, and you should. It fucking sucked. I know you both feel bad for what you did, and you should. But you can’t make it up to me by trying to make me be who you want me to be. I need to be good enough the way I am.”

Happy leaned forward, his expression drastically softer. “Midget. Hope. You are good enough the way you are. You are so much more than good enough. But I want you to be happy. I want a good life for you. Your mother wanted a good life for you.”

Hope laughed, tears bright in her eyes. “*My mother* told me to know my own mind and not let anybody tell me they knew it better. That’s the last thing she ever told me. That’s what she wrote. So you can both fuck off!” She pushed away from the table and stormed

to the patio door. Frank and Happy watched her walk through the yard. It was clear pretty quickly where she'd gone. It was dusk, almost too dark, but they let her go. She'd only been entirely free of a cast for a couple of weeks; Frank hoped she didn't hurt herself walking to the stream in the near dark.

Happy sighed. "I'll go get her in a few minutes. Let her have some time."

"She's right, you know." Frank got up and started clearing the dishes.

Happy helped her, and they carried the dishes to the kitchen. Nora started to shriek the second she was alone at the table, and Happy grabbed a washcloth from a drawer and soaked it. On his way back to Nora to wash her up, he turned and said, "Yeah, I know. I fucked up again. I don't know how to do this, little girl."

"Maybe you need to let Hope show you how." He didn't answer. After a beat, he turned and went to release Nora from the prison of her high chair. Free and clean, she toddled past the kitchen at what amounted to a run. Frank knew she was on her way to Leo.

Happy came in with the washcloth. Frank stepped back from the sink, where she was rinsing dishes for the dishwasher, and he rinsed the remains of Nora's dinner from the cloth. He wrung it out and draped it on the side of the sink. Then he turned to Frank and put his hand on her slight swell of a belly and kissed her forehead. It was becoming a common gesture for him; Frank liked it. It was hard to be pregnant this way, without Juice to share it with her. This touch from Happy made her feel like the baby was welcome and wanted, as complicated as things were.

He stepped back and opened the drawer where the flashlights were. It occurred to her that he knew where everything was in this kitchen. "Okay, I'm gonna go talk to her. I'll try not to fuck it up this time."

She laughed. "Good luck." He winked and headed out.

Her very strange family.

## CHAPTER 25: Happy

Hope was exactly where Hap thought she'd be—sitting on the big rock over the stream. When she saw him coming, she huffed with obvious exasperation, but she didn't move. Hap sat next to her. They were side by side, like they used to be when he brought her out here to talk.

“Sorry, midget. I'm tryin' to do right by you. Guess I can't figure out what that is.” She didn't answer. They sat quietly for a few minutes. Hap really didn't know what to do. The thought of just letting her wander through her life, letting things happen by default—it made him crazy. When he looked at what she was doing now—working at Frank's shop, living at home, spending most of her free time with Abel—he saw only one result: Hope becoming Abel's old lady, taking his ink before she was old enough to buy her own beer.

No. He could not let that happen. He didn't know what Vivian had written to her, but he was sure Hope was misunderstanding her somehow. Vivian would not have wanted this for their daughter.

But if Vivian were here, Hope would be on a different path. Her family would be intact. She'd be in school; Hap was sure of it. Hap had abandoned her when she badly needed him, and now she was adrift—or worse, she was tied to Abel. The kid wasn't as bad as Hap had always thought, and Hap was capable of admitting that he was taking pretty good care of his daughter, but she was just too goddamn young to lock into this life. She needed to know there was more out there than violence and blood and death, and waiting around for an old man who might not come home.

“You don't get to pick my life for me, Daddy.” It was the first time either of them had spoken for awhile, and Hope all but whispered it.

“That's not what I'm trying to do, midge.” He put his hand on her thigh. She looked down at it but let it lie there.

“Yeah, it is.”

Hap was done talking in circles about this shit. Shifting to face her, he grabbed her arm and turned her toward him. “No, it's not. I want *you* to pick your life. Something to work for.”

“Why won't you hear me? I want the life I have.”

He shook her a little; he couldn't help it. “Hope, dammit, *you* need to hear *me*. You are 17 years old. You're a high school dropout. Are you telling me you're absolutely positive that in ten years—or five—you're gonna want this life, working at a comic book shop, hanging around the clubhouse, waiting for your old man to get back from a run? That's it? That's all you want? Because the choices you make now can take away choices later.”

Shrugging herself free of his grip, Hope asked, “Does it make me a bad person if that’s what I want? Am I worth less?”

“Fuck, Hope, don’t turn it around like that. Of course not. That’s bullshit. But there’s a lot more in the world than you’ve seen. Nobody should just fall into this life. You gotta make the choice for it.”

She turned away and watched the water moving lazily below them. Sundown had happened, and the world had gone grey. Hap watched her, taking in her profile. It was like sitting beside Vivian, her hair caught back in a thick band like the one Hap wore around his wrist, a few long, errant waves dancing around her temple.

Without turning back to face him she said, “Then you shouldn’t have had me. Because this is the life I know. I don’t get outsiders. I don’t understand them at all. Daddy, you hardly ever have to deal with normal people. I hate them. They’re fake to each other all the time. They’re so mean, too, and for the stupidest reasons ever. They watch stupid TV shows about stupid people and talk about it like it’s the coolest thing ever. They spend all their time trying to have just *crap* and hating people for having more *crap* than they do. It’s, like, contagious, too, I guess, because Thomas has totally turned into one of them. I can barely stand to talk to him anymore. Everything’s about how much lawyers make and what kind of car he’s gonna buy and how one of the partners at the place he worked at over the summer took him out on his yacht. I’ve heard that story like a hundred times.”

Now she turned, and Hap could see that her eyes were hazy with tears. He reached for her hand, and she let him take it as she continued, “Do you even know what it’s like to walk around all the time barely able to keep from just randomly punching people in the throat? Because that’s what school was like for me. Daddy, that’s what *the mall* is like for me. I can’t live in that world. I’ll end up in prison. I like it at Frank’s shop. Most of the people who come in are kinda weird, too. I get weird. Even if it’s not my kind of weird.”

Hap knew exactly what it was like to have to work not to punch people. It happened on almost every rare occasion that he found himself having to deal with people who didn’t know him or his kind. That’s why he avoided restaurants any fancier than a diner, why he preferred motels to hotels, why he had taken Vivian to exactly two movies during their entire relationship and no other kind of show in a venue anywhere but a bar, unless she was performing. Fuck, there were times when he had trouble getting through the transaction to pay for gas and a damn Slim Jim without reaching under the bulletproof glass and breaking the clerk’s head on it.

It was a shitty way to go through life, pissed all the time. He didn’t want that for his daughter. But he’d made her. She was his. And she hadn’t gotten much of a helping of her mother’s mellow state of mind.

He got it. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Okay, midge. Okay. Will you do something for me, though? Will you finish high school”—he put his hand up to stop the virulent protest he saw in her face; even as night was falling, the flash in her dark eyes was clear—“get your GED or do online classes or something, so if you change your mind you’re ready to do somethin’ about it. Do that for me? Please?”

He could sense that she was at least giving it some consideration. “Okay. I’m not going back into the school building. But I’ll do that—one of those. Okay.”

He had to take that as a mark in the win column. Not much, not enough, but what he could get. He wasn’t done yet, though. “I got one more thing, midge.”

“Daddy, come on.”

“No, I need to say this. I’m trying to do this the right way, though, so help me, okay? I want you to tell me about you and Abel.”

Her eyes got wide. “What about us? You don’t want to know what—”

He was horrified at the idea of the rest of that sentence. “No! No! Fuck! It’s bad enough I know you do. I want to know if you love him.”

He’d caught her off-guard, and her mouth snapped shut. She was quiet for a bit. “I’m not sure. I think so, but I don’t know how to be sure. He says he loves me.”

Fuck. Well, he could see it himself. The boy had it bad. “You say that back?” Of course she had. She was a teenage girl having sex, whose boyfriend had said it to her.

But she surprised him. “No. I need to know if it’s true first.”

His girl had a level fucking head. He sat there and let that realization really take hold. All the shit she’d had to deal with in her little life, all the shit he’d put her through, and she was sitting here, talking to him, calling him Daddy. Forgiving him. Loving him anyway. And being careful with how she shared her feelings with people. Hap finally understood that he needed to trust that more.

“Good girl. That’s straight up. Makes me proud.”

She snorted. “You’re just glad I haven’t told him I love him.”

“No, midge. It’s not that. You know I think you’re too young to tie yourself too much to him. He’s not a bad kid, not anymore, but you’re just too young.” He could see her amping up to fight him again, so he squeezed the hand he still held. “All I’m gonna say. Except this: I need this promise from you, and then I’ll back off him; that’ll be *my* promise. I need you to promise you won’t take his ink until you talk it out with somebody

first. Ink is serious shit, midge. I don't want you making that kind of commitment without talking it through."

"Daddy, I don't have anybody to talk to. There's nobody but Abel."

"You can talk to me." It broke his shriveled heart to think of her with no one she trusted enough to confide in. Knowing that he'd ruined that trust she'd once had in him clawed viciously at him.

"God. No, I can't—not about Abel. Sorry, Daddy, but no."

"Then Frank."

She made a frustrated sound, a cross between a grunt and a growl. "You have to stop that. You keep trying to make Frank my mother, and you have to stop."

That wasn't it at all. The idea appalled him, and she'd said it twice tonight. "Not your mother, midge. Never that. There's no one who'll ever replace her. Not for you and not for me. *Ever*. But Frank is your friend. You've always been able to talk to her."

"My friend who fucked my dad and is having a baby with him? That friend?"

Her harshness knocked the wind out of him a little, and they were quiet while he regrouped. "I thought you'd forgiven that. I thought you said you were okay. We don't know it's mine."

"Doesn't matter, though, does it? You're already making some kind of family thing with her." She sighed, and Hap heard the catch in it. "There's okay and there's okay. It changed everything. There's this big secret. Every time Uncle Chibs or Uncle Jax or whoever makes a fuss about how Juice left something so great behind, this neon sign lights up in my head: MY DAD FUCKED FRANK. I hate it." Hope swiped impatiently at her cheek with the hand Hap wasn't holding.

"I don't know what to do to make it better, midge. I don't know any other ways to be sorry."

"I know. I'm trying, but you have to stop pushing. I'll be okay if you stop trying to make me okay."

"Okay."

"And I'll promise that if Abel ever wants to give me his crow, I'll think first. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Let's go back inside. I'm cold."

Hap stood and helped his daughter up. “Love you, midge.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

Holding her hand, he turned on the flashlight and led them back to Frank’s house.

-oOo-

Hap walked across the back yard to the music room. Hope was in there, messing around with her guitar. She was getting pretty good, but he knew she was usually back there when she was feeling down about something.

She was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, her mother’s sheet music spread out around her. She looked up when he came in.

“Hey, midge. You got plans today? Romeo comin’ over?”

“Not until later. He’s closing the garage tonight. Why.”

“Wanna learn to drive?”

“What? Really?”

“Sure. You can learn on the SUV. You get your license, that can be your cage.”

She jumped to her feet and racked her guitar. “Oh my God, Daddy! Seriously? But I don’t have my permit.”

Hap shrugged. “Where we’re goin’, you won’t need to worry. And you can get your permit next week. Just a written test. Pep says the study book is online. You’ll ace it.”

She flew into his arms and hugged him hard. It was the most free and unguarded she’d been with him since they lost Vivian. “You rock! You rock! Let’s go!”

When he pulled into the abandoned subdivision near Stockton, Hope started laughing hard. Uncontrollably. He asked, “What’s funny?” but she just laughed harder. He pulled back to the farthest street, a little cul du sac, and she actually clutched her stomach and doubled over.

He was smiling, because that kind of laughter couldn’t help but be contagious, but he was confused and a little worried. “Midget? What?”

She struggled to control herself, and finally sat up and wiped tears from her eyes. “Is this like a Sons place? Do you all know it?”

It was, actually. They'd had a few meets and handoffs here. It was off the grid and distant from any active properties. "Why?"

"This is where Abel taught me to ride." Her smile was wide and delighted, and Hap was charmed, despite the reminder that Abel had gone behind his back and taught his girl to ride.

Fuck. But, actually, it was an excellent place to learn to ride. Probably the safest place the kid could have picked. Hap would teach someone to ride here. He decided to take the high road and keep Hope's mood like it was, light and free. "Good for him, then. It's a good place to learn."

He parked, and they switched positions.

-oOo-

"Stop! Stop! Christ—stop!" Hope braked, and the car squealed to a jerky stop. "Not right here—pull over!" She yanked the car off the busy town street and slammed it to a stop, jumping the curb. She shoved the gearshift into park and then sat back, her arms crossed, scowling at the windshield.

*She* was in a snit?

Hap was going to have a heart attack. Or a stroke. Some kind of stress-induced event, which would be vastly preferable to dying crumpled in the *bitch seat of a goddamn cage*, which was looking like the only other possible outcome here. They'd spent four afternoons in that deserted subdivision, and it had been fine. Hope listened well and was able to do what he instructed her to do, and it was *fine*. She'd pitched a small fit when he insisted that she spend the first two days learning about the car instead of driving it, but he'd simply told her it was his way or the bitch seat, and she'd calmed down. He allowed her to drive for a couple of minutes at the end of those first two days, just so he could show her how the things he'd explained would feel when she was driving.

He wanted her to know what it was she was doing when she pushed the pedals and turned the wheel. He wanted her to know the kinds of things that could go wrong and what to look for. When she was little, she'd liked to watch him work on his bike or Vivian's car, but she lost interest by the time she was in high school—mainly, he thought, because he tended to get focused on his work and not pay her much attention. He'd never actually taught her anything while he was working. He regretted that now. Add it to his long list of regrets.

So he taught her how the engine worked, and he quizzed her to make sure she understood. He made sure she understood all the interior controls, too, and he made her read the manual cover to cover as homework. If he was putting his only child behind the wheel of a killing machine, she was damn well going to be prepared.

Only then would he let her do more than pull it forward or backward. They spent two days driving around that subdivision. He tried to invent scenarios for driving conditions, and he taught her to parallel park. Everything went fine, he thought. She got frustrated a couple of times, and so did he, but it went well.

In the meantime, she got her learner's permit. And today, he let her go out on the road.

She could ride a bike, right? She'd been out on her own, and Hap had to assume that Abel had enough of a self-preservation streak not to let her on the road unless she could handle it. Sure, she'd wrecked, but that wasn't her fault. Driving, though, seemed beyond her.

He knew he shouldn't be yelling so much, but she was going to kill them both. She couldn't stay in her lane. She drove far too fast and couldn't seem to modulate her speed. She'd pulled out into oncoming traffic three times, each time a wreck was narrowly avoided by other alert drivers. Then she couldn't seem to pull out at all, even when the road was clear.

"Please stop yelling, Daddy. It's not helping." He could hear a catch in her voice. Great. He'd made her cry. He was going to undo all the progress they'd made since her accident in one afternoon, while he was trying to do something nice. He took a breath and tried to calm down.

Then he took another. And another. Finally feeling like he could speak calmly, he said, "Maybe you're not ready, midge."

She jerked her head around, looking hurt and betrayed. Fan-fucking-tastic. He was still fucking this up. "I'm almost 18—of course I'm ready. That's stupid. Even morons know how to drive. It's you yelling, and this big stupid gigantic truck. I can't see anything, and it takes up too much space. It freaks me out. I just want a bike. I can do that. I already know how to do that. Can't I just get a bike?"

She was no closer to 18 than she was to 17, but he wasn't going to argue that point. "Not while I have any say. You almost died on a bike. It's too much machine for you to handle. No."

"You know you're a big sexist right?" She huffed, and he thought he actually saw her lower lip sticking out a bit. For some reason, that lip turned his mood right around.

Grinning, he said, "That's news to you, midge? Feel like I've been pretty upfront about it." She glared at him. "Look, this is the cage I have to give you. I'm not gonna change my mind about the damn bike. Until you can handle all that on your own—the bike, the insurance, all of it—then you either learn to drive this, or you keep bumming rides. Your call."

"Couldn't I just get a smaller car? You could keep this one. Sometimes you need something besides the Dyna."

“I don’t want you in a little tin foil piece of shit, midge. Not gonna happen. I gave you your choices.”

“I want a different car.”

“Then get a better job and buy yourself one.”

She huffed and flopped back against the seat, still in her temper.

Okay. He was gonna have to suck this up. “You’re not doing so bad.” That was a lie, but he felt okay about it. “You need to slow down some, and you need to check your mirrors more—especially before you change lanes or turn. You’re correcting the steering wheel too much as you go. And you need to ease up some when you brake.”

She shook her head. “Geez, Daddy, is there anything I do right?”

Not really. He thought for a minute. Smiling, he said, “You’re keeping the pedals straight.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and he smiled more broadly. “Hey—that’s important. That’s how the old guy ended up parked in the clubhouse back in the day.”

Hope was still in full pout mode. Hap cleared his throat. He’d told her he would teach her, so he was going to teach her. “Okay, midge. Snap out of it. I’ll drive now, if you want, but that’s the end of the lessons, then. It’d be better if you drove us home. Nice and easy. No rush. Up to you.”

She sat there, scowling at the windshield, for a while. Then she resettled herself in the seat and put her hand on the ignition button. “I don’t drive that fast, Daddy. You start yelling at me to slow down if I get within 5 miles of the speed limit. You need to calm down.” She started the engine.

“You go slower, and I’ll be calmer. Now, before you pull out, what are you going to do?”

When they pulled back into traffic, Hap dropped his right hand between the door and the seat and squeezed his fist tight. The rest of his body he kept relaxed. He’d taught her what he could; now he was just going to have to hold on and let her feel her way home. He’d stay quiet until she asked for help.

## CHAPTER 26: Hope

“What do you think?”

Hope wandered around the little one-bedroom apartment. It was unremarkable in every way. She shrugged. “Seems fine.”

Abel groaned. “Fuck, Hope. That’s what you said about all four we looked at. You got no opinion? For real? You?”

She didn’t understand why he cared so much what *she* thought about *his* apartment. “Pick whatever one you like. You’re the one who’s going to live in it.”

Abel gave her a weird look, then turned to the apartment manager, a rotund woman in blue sweatpants and a huge San Francisco Giants t-shirt. “Thanks. I’ll let you know.”

He led Hope back onto the walkway, and the Giants fan said, “It’ll go quick. Won’t hold without the deposit up front.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Abel said and then practically dragged Hope back to his bike.

She went to pick up her helmet, but he stopped her. “No. Let’s walk for a minute. I want to talk to you.” Still holding her hand, he led her across the street to a little playground area, and they sat on the nearest bench. “Why won’t you help me with this?”

Hope was surprised. “What do you mean? I’m right here.”

Abel laughed, but there wasn’t any mirth in it. “Yeah, but you don’t care. I don’t understand why you don’t care. Why don’t you care?”

He was getting really worked up about her feelings about where he lived, and she was baffled. “I care. I want you to find a place you like. I just don’t understand why what *I* think means so much. Why are you getting so upset about this?”

He stood abruptly and took a couple of steps away from the bench, then turned back to face her. “You really don’t get it, do you? Fuck.” He squatted in front of her and put his hands on hers. “Hope, I’m in love with you.”

Her stomach flipped in all kinds of directions. It confused her *so much* when he said that. “Abel . . .”

He cut her off. “I know, I’m not supposed to say that. I’m supposed to wait until you figure it out. You don’t know what you feel. *I know*. Well, I wish you’d fuckin’ figure it out, because I want you to move in with me.”

She gasped and yanked her hands out from under his, which was very obviously a wrong and hurtful thing to do, because Abel leapt up and stalked away, headed toward an empty swing set.

She didn't follow; she needed to think. Abel was nuts if he thought her dad would let her move in with him before she was 18. Even after, he would most likely throw himself bodily in front of that decision. But the bigger issue wasn't her dad. It was what it meant that Abel wanted this. What did it change? It changed a lot, even the idea of it changed a lot, but she had to think about specifics. Did she even want to live with him?

She didn't know. All of this relationship stuff felt big and thick and more than she could make sense of. She got up and went to the swings, sitting on the one next to Abel. She sat quietly, turning the seat a little, side to side.

Abel spoke first. "How do you feel about me, Hope?"

"Abel, I told you, I don't know."

"I'm not asking if you love me. I'm asking how I make you feel."

"Right now, guilty." She turned the swing away from him, then let it jerk back.

"Why?"

"Because I hurt your feelings. I don't know how to give you what you want from me."

"We've been together for four months. It does hurt that you say you don't know. So tell me what you do know."

She didn't want to do that. She didn't like the way he was putting her on the spot, but she knew it wasn't fair to torment him like this—and that's what she was doing. But she couldn't say what he wanted to hear. She couldn't be sure it was real. She didn't know how to know if what she felt for him meant anything like love. She didn't have any way to measure it.

"No. You tell me how you're so sure you love me. What does it feel like?"

He laughed, and again it was bitter and harsh. "Right now, it sucks." He sighed. "Fine. You want to know how I know? I just do. I don't have to think about it. When I'm not with you, I wish I was. I think about you all the time. I want you to be happy. When you smile, my heart hurts with it. When we're naked together, I think I go a little crazy, it feels so good. I want that to happen a lot more than it does. When you ran away and got hurt, I felt like my insides were being chewed up. I was so scared. But it's more than all of that. It's like you changed the way I see. Shit I liked, I don't care about anymore. Things I wanted to do, I don't think about anymore."

He'd looked down at his feet in the dusty ground under the swings while he talked. Now he looked over at her. "Do you feel any of that for me?"

Hope was reeling. Everything he'd said had felt so good to hear. It was like a spoken love letter, and it made her want to be in his arms. But if what he described was what love was, then she still wasn't sure. She loved it when he smiled; her belly got all flippy. She loved being close to him, touching him. She loved the way he made her body feel. But she didn't know what it would feel like not to have him. She didn't think about him all the time—often, but not all the time. She didn't think he changed her way of seeing at all.

"Don't leave me hangin', babe. Do you feel like that about me?"

She wanted to just say yes, she loved him, and give him what he wanted. But now she was only more confused. "Some of it."

"But not all." He looked tired. She felt terrible.

"No. I'm sorry, but some of it I still just don't know."

He got up from the swing and held out his hand to her. "I'm gonna take you home."

He was tense in her arms the whole ride back. When they got there, he pulled up in her driveway but didn't cut the engine. Hope dismounted, feeling like she wanted to cry. She put her hand on the handlebars, trying to keep him from leaving. The look he gave her felt heavy with meaning and emotion, but she couldn't make it clear in her head.

Finally, he cut the engine. "What?"

"Abel, I'm so sorry. I want to tell you what you want me to, but it's all too confusing. I don't want not to be with you, though."

"I can't deal with getting jerked around like this anymore. I need a break. I need you to back up so I can go get my dick sucked."

She took her hand away instantly, shocked and hurt. He fired the bike back up and drove away. He didn't spare her another look.

-oOo-

Two days later, Dustin, one of the new prospects, dropped Hope off at Frank's house after work. She was in a mood, and Dustin had spent most of the drive leaning against the door of the club van, trying to get as much distance from her as she could. She hated being chauffeured around. She especially hated being in this van without Abel. But she still had months before she could get her driver's license, even though the lessons had gotten better. Her dad was on a run, so was Abel, but he wasn't speaking to her anyway,

and Frank had the kids. So Dustin and the van was the only ride she had to Frank's. The city bus didn't come out this far.

She thought it sucked that her dad wouldn't let her stay home alone when he was away, but there was no talking to him about it. He didn't think it was safe. They lived in a fortress, practically—all the windows and doors barred, an alarm system, security lights—but he still wouldn't even consider it. Which was pretty funny, considering she would be 18 in April and could do whatever she wanted.

Not that she thought her dad would magically cool out when she turned 18. She didn't figure he'd think 18 was any different from 17.

He made her stay at Frank's when he was out of town. That wasn't too bad, really. She liked hanging out with Leo and Nora, and Frank mostly stayed out of her way. She'd lived there for months while her dad was away, so it was familiar, and comfortable enough. But it was a huge drag trying to figure out transportation to work from this house in the country.

Frank almost never worked in the shop anymore. Since what happened to Juice, she was with the kids full time, and popped into the shop to check on things occasionally. She'd made Jerry the manager. Which kinda sucked, since Jerry immediately got all *I'm the boss* about everything, and Hope immediately started liking him a whole lot less. But he knew Hope was family, so she got the hours she wanted, and he stayed off her case a lot more than he did everybody else. She was starting to make some decent money and save most of it. She didn't have that much she wanted to spend money on, so saving wasn't too hard. She thought she'd be able to buy a bike by the time she got her license.

If she hadn't forgotten how to ride by then. Except to ride bitch, she hadn't been on a bike since her accident. Abel had stopped letting her ride, out of fear of her father. Well, he said it was respect, but Hope knew it was fear. She didn't know exactly what had happened in Fresno after her accident, but Abel was a lot different around her dad after that.

Not that it mattered anymore, she guessed. She hadn't talked to Abel in two days. Since they'd talked every day and had seen each other most days for months, she thought two days of silence was a sign, even though he was on the run with her dad. That and leaving her to go get a blow job. She guessed they'd broken up.

It sucked. Now, she thought about him all the time. She thought about him getting his stupid blow job. Hope hadn't even done that yet. It freaked her out. He'd been patient about it, but she knew he'd wanted her to do it. He probably grabbed the first girl he saw in the clubhouse. Maybe more than one. It made her sick and hurt and furious to think about it.

She missed him, too. She didn't have anybody else to talk to. She liked it when he called just to say hi. Sometimes, he would text her about stupid stuff happening at the garage or

idiot customers. He'd text her photos of the weird stuff people had in their cars. Even when he'd been away, he'd stay in touch. For the past two days, her phone was practically silent, except for her dad checking on her. She hated it.

She'd almost called him a bunch of times, but then she'd get a picture in her head of some stupid club girl with her face between his legs, and she'd put her phone away. That hurt. It made her throat tight and her stomach cramp.

Breaking up sucked.

Dustin dropped her off and made haste back down the driveway. Hope went into Frank's house. It was almost 10pm, so the kids were asleep, but Frank was awake. The lights in her painting loft were on. Feeling at loose ends, Hope hung her jacket up and went up to the loft.

Frank was at her easel, painting. She'd been doing this new collage-y thing with paint and crinkled newspaper and other stuff. Hope thought it was pretty rad. For all the weirdness she felt about Frank now, she was still the coolest living woman Hope knew. She wanted to be able to do something artistic like this. Her mom had been an amazing writer and musician. Frank was an amazing artist. Her dad made amazing tattoos. Nothing about Hope was amazing. She'd tried all of it. All she could do was kinda play the guitar and piano, write bad poetry, and mimic what other people drew. Her dad and Frank said she had talent, but they weren't exactly objective.

Frank was starting to look pregnant, a little pooch tightening her t-shirts. Hope hated that. She knew she needed to be okay with everything that had happened; she didn't really have a choice but to be okay with it, but she'd really been hoping that the baby was Juice's. It might be; she guessed they'd never know for sure, but she'd realized that it didn't matter. She could see it when her dad and Frank were together—which was becoming more and more often. He was going to be that baby's father, even if he wasn't, even if the kid called him something else, something like Grandpa Hap or Grampy, like Frank's other kids called him. Her dad was going to be the father in Frank's house. Even if he and Frank weren't a couple—which Hope was starting to think possible, and she was totally traumatized by the idea—he was going to be father to her kids.

That thought made her feel fizzy. She had recently developed a fear that her dad would want to move in here. She hadn't said anything to anybody about it, but the more time they spent here at Frank's, the more terrified she became. Her mom was in *their* house, not here. If her dad moved, she wouldn't be able to take it. She thought she'd just go completely nuts if he sold her mom's house. She already felt half nuts most of the time, anyway.

She missed Abel. She couldn't talk to him about any of this stuff, but when she was with him she didn't think about it so much. She felt good when she was with him. Happy, even. But she'd screwed that all up.

“Hey, kiddo. How was your day?” Frank smiled and put her paintbrush down. She wiped her hands and started to clean up, clearly stopping for the night. Hope assumed it was so she could spend time with her. It used to be that way. Hope would come up here, and they’d sit on the ratty old futon and talk.

Hope went and sat down. Frank smiled and finished cleaning up, then joined her. “Something up, buttercup?”

She didn’t have anybody to talk to. Nobody. She couldn’t take it anymore. She looked at Frank and tried to remember what it was like to just feel calm around her. Something had to give here. Pretty soon it was going to be Hope’s head.

“I think Abel and I broke up.”

She could tell right away that Frank was shocked and pleased that Hope had said that. She looked relieved. Hope’s first instinct was to get angry, but then she understood that Frank was relieved not about the breakup but that Hope was talking to her about it. She felt okay with that.

“Oh, kid, I’m sorry. Wait—what do you mean you *think*?”

So she told her about apartment hunting and the conversation they’d had on the swings. How he left her on her driveway, and what he said before he did. It was like a barricade came down, and Hope was telling Frank everything about Abel—not the sex stuff, but about how he made her feel, and how confused she was about how she felt, and how she didn’t understand how she was supposed to know if she loved him, and just all of it. About halfway through, she realized she was crying, and Frank had taken her hand. Then she started crying harder. By the time she’d spewed everything Abel, she was a blubbering mess, and she’d laid her head on Frank’s shoulder.

“Oh, Hope. You’ve had that bottled up all this time? I’m so sorry. No wonder you’re confused. New love is the kind of thing you need to tell somebody about.” Frank pushed Hope gently back and wiped her cheeks. “Can I make a suggestion? You don’t have to take it, but maybe it could help?”

Sniffing, and feeling really stupid for falling apart like that, Hope nodded.

“You’re thinking too much, Hope. That’s why it helps to have somebody to tell about your guy—to get it out of your head. Love isn’t brains, kiddo. It’s blood.”

Hope snorted, almost snorting herself in the process. “Did you just quote Buffy the Vampire Slayer to me?”

“That you knew that right off is one of my very favorite things about you. And don’t knock the wisdom of Spike. It’s a classic for a reason, kid. Seriously, though, love isn’t logic. It’s the opposite of logic. If you’re waiting to reasonably decide you love Abel—or

anybody—it's never going to happen. Sometimes you need to trust your heart to know more than your head."

Hope sat back on the futon, and the two of them were quiet. She thought about Abel, and her mind wandered, maybe because she was so tired. She could feel things sorting out a little. Thoughts and feelings finding their way inside her. Resting back on the futon, she let her head flop toward Frank. "I think it's too late, though."

Frank smiled wisely. "I bet you a hundred bucks it's not too late. Call him."

Hope felt like it *was* too late. "It makes me sick to think of him getting a blowjob. I want to hurt that girl. I don't even know who she is, but I want to hurt her. He's probably getting blowjobs—or more—all the way between here and Rogue River and back."

"Your dad's with him, so I doubt that. But I hear you about wanting to hurt a bitch. I beat a girl once over Juice. Very satisfying. You going to be okay with it if he has been extracurricular?"

"It's my fault, right? Wait—Juice cheated?"

Frank shook her head. "Not really. It's complicated, and very old news. On the more pressing point, it's not your fault. Abel makes his own choices, too. Just factor it in. That's blood, too, that jealousy. Thinking doesn't help much. I don't think you'll know if you can deal until you try to deal."

Later, when Hope was in the guest room getting ready for bed, she called Abel. It was the first time she'd let the call go through, but she got his voice mail. She didn't leave a message. Instead, she texted him: *I'm sorry. If it's not too late, I'd like to talk to you. Miss you.* She stared at it, her finger wavering between "cancel" and "send," feeling scared and vulnerable. Finally, irritated with herself for being a pussy, she huffed and pressed "send."

## CHAPTER 27: Abel

Abel stormed into the clubhouse and looked around. He'd seen Hap's bike when he dropped Hope off, so that wasn't a problem. But it was too damn early. Nobody around at all—no Sons, which was good, since half of 'em would rat him out, but no chicks, either.

He was fucking serious. He was done. Lately what he felt most around Hope was bummed. He loved her so much sometimes he felt crazy with it, like he was coming out of his skin. And she didn't even know how she felt? Like he hadn't made a big enough impression for her to even be able to tell? It sucked. He didn't know why he wasn't good enough. Why *the fuck* wasn't he ever good enough?

No. That was whiny bullshit. He meant what he'd said. He was done. Best way to be done is to do something to make sure it was done. He needed to find somebody to fuck.

He knew just the place. The sandwich shop.

There was a little sandwich shop a couple of blocks down the street. Prospects had been going in there for probably decades, bringing lunch back to the Sons several times a week. Abel figured there was a reason the Sons' main lunch spot had such a buffet of sweet pussy. Most of the girls who worked there were young and pretty damn hot—a lot of them turned up at the clubhouse within a year or two, once they got old enough.

Legend had it that Chibs' old lady had worked there at some point back in the day, but that couldn't be right. No one really saw her around the club more than maybe once or twice a year, but she was definitely not the Crow Eater type.

When he got to the shop, they were closing up. Lunch was their main business, and they closed at five o'clock. Abel knocked on the door, and a cute little brunette came up, smiling when she saw his kutte. He didn't know her; he hadn't been down here for months, not since he'd been patched in, and this girl was new since then. But he smiled, and she smiled bigger. She pointed at the closed sign, and he made a pouty face. She rolled her eyes and opened the door.

“Sorry—we closed at five.”

Abel could see her name tag now, pinned to her yellow polo-style uniform shirt: Brittany. “Aw, Brittany, girl. I was just hopin' for a soda real quick? No harm in that, right?”

She looked behind her; Abel assumed somebody was in the back. Then she turned back to him and sighed. “Okay. Just a soda. But the register's already cashed out, so you're getting my one free drink of the day.” She stepped back and let him in.

He sauntered past, feeling weird and sad, but knowing how to play this and determined to do it. “That's sweet, girl. Tell ya what—we can share.” He put his hand on her hip, his

fingers spread over her ass. He had her; he could see it in her eyes. Jesus, what a slut. He'd been in the door 30 seconds.

Five minutes later, he had her in the ladies, his hand in her pants. She was working his jeans open. She kept trying to kiss him, but he wrenched her head to the side. He didn't want her mouth anywhere on him but one place.

She got his jeans open, and he realized he wasn't even half hard. He set her back from him just as she was going to her knees. He didn't want her. She was plenty cute, but he just felt disgusted. She had no idea who he was, and she didn't care. She just wanted to fuck a Son. He could do anything to her, and she'd let him. Five minutes after laying eyes on him.

That was supposed to be a *good* thing, the total lack of effort it took to get sexed up whenever he wanted. He'd loved that. But now he loved Hope. She took all the effort he had to give, but she was all he wanted. She'd totally ruined him. A few months ago, he'd already have had this little chick face-first on the wall. Now she just made him sad and sick. He buttoned up his jeans.

She looked really pissed. "What the fuck?"

"Sorry, girl. You should have a little self-respect, though. Not give it out so quick."

She slapped him. "You *asshole*. You don't know me any better than I know you, and *I'm* a slut?"

He didn't hurt women. He'd never hurt a woman. Well, not physically. He was pretty sure he'd hurt Hope earlier. But his emotions were in a turmoil, and his head was no better. He grabbed Brittany by the shoulders and lifted her feet off the ground, then he slammed her into the wall. She made a weird squawking gasp; he ignored it. "Be careful, you skanky little gash. A bitch hits a Son, she's not gonna like the result."

He dropped her and walked out. He stopped halfway through the front door and almost turned around to apologize. Fuck, he didn't understand half of what was going through his head. He left and headed back to the clubhouse. Fine. Fuck it. He wouldn't get head. He'd never fucking get head ever again in his goddamn life. He'd just get drunk.

-oOo-

Riding hung over was not one of life's great pleasures. Abel had passed out in the clubhouse, draped over the bar, waking up to Hap slapping him upside the head. After a tense couple of minutes, during which he waited to see if Hap was going to kill him, which would at least put him out of his misery, he deduced that Hope had not told her dad what had gone down between them the day before. In retrospect, breaking up with her at all was to risk her father's wrath. Doing it the day before a run and in such a

dickish way was colossally stupid. But Hope hadn't given him up. Of course she hadn't. Not her style at all.

He didn't know what to do to make her love him. He hated how much it hurt. Made him feel weak.

The gun run to Rogue River was uneventful, except for Abel's hangover and his brothers' delight in it. Everybody else had had an easy night, knowing they were hitting the road in the morning. So they tortured Abel. It was a long ride.

They stayed an extra day, because the Oregon charter had some kind of trouble they needed help with. Turned out to be no big deal; the show of muscle with SAMCRO present was enough to calm down whatever was going on. Abel hadn't paid much attention. He was told to go somewhere and stand there at the ready. He did.

The second night, Hap was especially morose and drinking a lot more heavily than he had been for awhile. One of Oregon's girls was pushing up on him hard. Abel watched, interested. He'd never seen Hap with anyone but Viv, but she'd been dead like seven or eight months. That was a long time to go without. Hap seemed to simply tolerate her. He barely noticed her, but she didn't give up. She had her hands all over him, rubbing his back, his arms. Hap just sat there, drinking. And drinking. And still she didn't give up. It was like someone had put her on him. But she had no sense of rejection at all. She was tenacious. Like a sex terrier.

She started to rub his neck—Abel could just imagine her cooing about his tense muscles or some shit—and she caught the chain Hap always wore. Abel had never seen what was hanging from it, but Hap never took it off so far as Abel knew. The girl pulled a little on the chain, smiling, and Hap grabbed her wrist, moving so fast Abel didn't even see it. He pulled her clear of his chain. Then he pushed the girl off the stool so hard she caught air and landed, hard, on her tailbone, a couple of feet away. He turned back to his Jack, as if he'd swatted away a pesky fly. Another girl helped the terrier up, and she limped off to a couch.

Abel's dad stepped up next to him, and Abel asked, "What's that all about?" He figured there was a better chance his dad would tell him it was none of his business, but he tried anyway.

But his dad answered. "It's a bad anniversary for Hap. Probably worse because it's the first one since Viv's gone. I thought maybe the run would keep his mind busy, but I should've known better."

"Anniversary of what?" He knew their wedding anniversary was in January; they'd usually had a party. Anyway, that wouldn't be a bad one. Or, maybe it would, now.

His dad finished his beer and signaled for another. “The day his hand got fucked up. More than that is his story to tell. Don’t fuckin’ ask him tonight, though. I wouldn’t ask him at all. Not your business, and he’s as likely to break your face as tell you. Likelier.”

Not long after that, Hap got up from the bar and staggered back to the dorms. Abel sat, still drinking, trying to decide whether he cared if he’d end up with another hangover. He looked around at the club girls. Rogue River was a small charter, and the pickings were slimmer than in Charming, but pussy was available.

But there was no fucking point. He was going to have to get over himself—and her—at some point, because he had no intention of becoming Hap and just letting his dick shrivel up from lack of use because he couldn’t have the one he wanted. But that point wasn’t here yet, apparently. The thought of getting blown by any of these gashes was just depressing.

He watched his dad hook up with one and settle in a chair. She dropped to her knees and opened his jeans. Run rule. Not his concern. It should apply to him, too—fuck, he didn’t even *have* a girl now. He should get some. Instead, he had another drink.

Rogue River only had three dorm rooms, and they were full by the time Abel was looking to sleep. So he found an unoccupied chair and settled in as best he could. He was just nodding off, cocooned in a gauzy alcoholic cloud, when he felt his registered phone buzz. He almost ignored it. It wasn’t club shit, and it was well after midnight. But he didn’t.

It was Hope. She hadn’t called or texted or anything since he’d left her standing in her driveway, looking like he’d really hurt her. He had, of course. He’d meant to.

*I’m sorry. If it’s not too late, I’d like to talk to you. Miss you.*

-oOo-

He’d tried to text her back right then, but his fingers were drunk, and he gave up. Since the morning, he’d read the text several times, and it made less sense every time. Too late for what? Too late to be texting? Too late for them? Too late to be sorry? And sorry about what? Not loving him? Hurting him? Talk to him about what? Miss him why? He’d started at least five texts and deleted them all. He didn’t want to have this conversation via text. He wasn’t sure he wanted to have it at all. And he had no privacy to call her, anyway. It would have to wait until he got back. If then. He could *not* deal if she just wanted to stomp on his heart a little more. There was only so long he’d be her bitch, and they’d taken that exit ramp a couple days ago.

The ride between Rogue River and Charming was about 5 hours, including a gas stop, and assuming traffic didn’t get in their way. Abel barely noticed the trip; he spent the whole damn ride trying to puzzle out Hope’s text and getting more and more confused. He almost missed it when his dad signaled for everyone to get off I-5 and take a side road. Abel figured he must have seen something on his little GPS; maybe an accident,

with cops. They didn't have the guns anymore, but they were all carrying, and there wasn't a serial number in the bunch.

They were riding down Road 4, virtually alone, when what seemed like the entire Mayan MC came around a turn. No unfortunate coincidence: they were obviously gunning for the Sons, and they were shooting within seconds of sighting them. They spread out and formed into groups. Planned and rehearsed. They'd known to expect them; how was that fucking possible? Sons scrambled for the holsters under their kutties, dodging bullets as they did.

In his right periphery, Abel saw a Son go down. Hap.

His bike slid down the shoulder, riderless. Abel turned, trying to see Hap, and return fire on the Mayans, and stay on his own ride. He couldn't see him. But the Mayans at the front were doubling back now, pulling over near where Hap had dropped his bike. The Sons were coming back, too, but not quickly enough; Abel and Hap had been at the back of the group, because Hap had slowed up to wait when Abel almost missed the pull-off on I-5.

Hap was down, off the road somewhere. Four Mayans were going for him, and right now, Abel was the only Son close. He could hear gunfire, bikes, and shouting up ahead, around a bend. He had no idea how soon he'd have help. He couldn't go back to Charming without Hope's dad. Jesus Christ, it would kill her. He could only think of one thing to do. He swung around and ducked low, seeking the paltry protection his bike had to offer, and rode straight for the Mayans dismounting on the shoulder. He fired his Sig the whole way.

## CHAPTER 28: Happy

Hap lay in the weeds and brambles, trying to keep his head clear and catch his breath. His left shoulder was on fire. *Goddammit. Goddamn son of a bitch fuck!* He'd gotten his sorry ass fucking shot. And he'd dropped his bike. He hadn't even had a chance to get his gun out of its holster.

Which meant he still had it. He shook the stun off and lifted his head. Above him on the road, he could hear the commotion. Gunfire, still. There was a goddamn battle going on up there. In broad daylight. The road had been deserted, but still. This was insanity.

He tried to stand but couldn't. He'd done something to his back on the way down. He could feel everything, so it wasn't broken, he didn't think, but strained, and badly. At least he hadn't done something humiliating and geriatric like breaking a hip. He looked up and saw bikes pulling up. He couldn't make out the riders, but he caught a glimpse of ape hangers. Mayans. Coming for him.

He wasn't having what he would call a stellar couple of days.

There was a cluster of decent-size rocks—small boulders, really—about fifteen feet away. Not much cover, but it would have to do. Hap pulled his gun and dragged himself over, ignoring the pain clutching at his spine and through his shoulder. The last few feet, bullets were singing past him. One hit dirt less than a foot from his head. He didn't try to shoot back, though, until he hit the rocks.

When he got there and got into position to return fire, it occurred to him to wonder why. Why was he fighting? A bullet took him now, that was a clean death. No shame in it. He could be done with this bullshit life. His empty bed. Maybe Vivian was on the other side, waiting. No—if there was an “other side,” there was no way he'd get to go to the same place she had.

But he could stop living this grey life without her. That would be enough.

Hope. He thought of his girl. Could he leave her again? He still hadn't figured out the way to be the kind of father she needed. All he did was fuck her up or get in her way. She was almost grown. She wanted to be grown—she thought she already was. Maybe she'd do better without him dragging her back.

And he was so motherfucking tired. He dropped his gun hand to the ground and started to drag himself out from the cover of the rocks. His shoulder was really cooking now, and his t-shirt and flannel were sopping blood. Hell, maybe he'd just bleed out from the bullet he'd already taken.

Then he heard a change in the yelling from the road, and the roar of another bike, coming from his right, full out, roaring like some kind of hellbeast. More gunfire, and a war whoop he could hear over the engine. Still at the rocks, Hap peered over and saw four

Mayans scattering. One went down, apparently shot. Two others dived. Hap had a clean shot at one and took it, putting a bullet through the guy's ear as he sat up in the weeds. He looked back up to the road in time to see . . . *Abel*, crashing his Softail into the Mayan's parked bikes. The kid lost his seat and tumbled down the same embankment Hap had, but he didn't get as far. He landed in the open, only ten feet or so from the road. And there were still two Mayans—at least—on their feet up there.

*Fucking moron asshole kid.* What the fuck had he done? Hap watched as Abel sat up, realized he'd dropped his sidearm, and then faced a Mayan—Hap recognized Perez, the club SAA—who drew on him at once. Abel on his knees, unarmed. Perez on the road above him, aiming at his head. He took the time to smile, probably because he understood he was about to take out the SAMCRO President's kid.

Abel did something then that caught Hap's attention. He stood up. Facing his certain death, he came off his knees. Caught Perez's attention, too. He said something to the boy. Hap used that moment to take his shot. He was feeling the blood loss, though, among other things, and he couldn't raise his left arm to steady his aim. One handed, dizzy, at this distance? He did his best, and caught Perez in the arm. He'd been going for a kill shot, but at least he'd disarmed him. He saw Abel leap forward. The commotion on the road got louder as more bikes were nearing. And then the noise in Hap's head became deafening, and the world went dark.

-oOo-

When Hap woke, he understood immediately where he was, before he'd even opened his eyes. He'd spent enough time in hospitals with Vivian to recognize every sound and smell. He could hear a machine beeping—heart monitor. He could feel the leads pulling lightly where they were stuck to his chest. He could feel the pulse oximeter clamped on his finger. The IV, and the beep of that machine. Must be getting low. He heard a doctor being paged. He smelled the peculiar smell of hospital linens. And damn, could he feel his body. Like he'd been caught in a cement mixer.

His first emotion upon waking and taking in these sensations, knowing his location, was overwhelming melancholy. He was still here. He wasn't fucking done. He didn't even open his eyes. He simply lay there until sleep or unconsciousness or whatever it was pulled him back into the black.

-oOo-

When he woke again, he did so with a start, coming out of the routine torment of his awful nightmare—Vivian rotting, as he held her, crumbling away in his arms. His shoulder complained loudly at the sudden movement, and he groaned.

He felt his hand squeezed.

“Daddy? Daddy?”

He opened his eyes and blinked them clear. Hope was at his bedside, looking like she hadn't slept in a long time. But she was smiling, her eyes muzzy with tears. "Hey, midget." His voice was barely a croak.

His daughter put his hand to her lips and kissed it over and over. He felt her tears on his knuckles. "You can't leave, Daddy. You promised you wouldn't leave me again. You promised. You promised."

Yes, he had. He kept his promises. Okay. Stand up. Face up. Stick it out. "I'm here, midge. It's okay. I'm here."

-oOo-

Considering he was an old coot, Hap recovered fairly quickly. The back pain was from broken ribs, so between that and the gaping through-and-through bullet wound, his torso was seriously fucked. The bullet had clipped his left collarbone, which made for a lingering ache he hoped would ease with healing, because his left side had taken enough of a beating. The left wasn't his dominant, but if he got the kind of aching in his shoulder that he got in his hand, that side was going to start really getting in his way.

At the moment, though, he was more upset at what had happened to his ink. The bullet and the wound it left had taken out the first three letters of the word "Family." Hap took that as a bad omen and was anxious to get it repaired. But that would be weeks.

Hope had not left until he had enough voice to yell at her. Abel was with her sometimes, but not often. Frank came every day. In fact, he had a steady damn stream of people trucking through his room all day. And a Prospect outside his door 24/7. He was being guarded. He found it emasculating. But he'd spent three days trapped in a bed pissing through a tube, so emasculating seemed about right. Now he was mobile, though, and taking care of his own pissing, and he found it hard not to be a shit to whichever Prospect whose ass was warming the chair at any given time. He didn't actually try not to be a shit, honestly.

The Mayan beef was hot. He got that from the Sons when Hope was in the cafeteria, or after he'd managed to get her to go the fuck back to Frank's. All the old ladies and kids—and Hap, dammit—had 24/7 protection now. Hap had been the only one to get seriously hurt in that crazy firefight on Road 4, but they'd killed three Mayans—including Perez. Abel's first kill. Two others had been injured.

They'd rigged a jackknife to block traffic on I-5 and divert the Sons to the side road. It was an elaborate ambush, and everybody knew it meant the Mayans had inside intel. They'd known about the gun run. Okay; a good hacker *maybe* could have put that together, and the Mayans had a fair one. But the Sons had stayed an unexpected extra day, and the timing had to be just about exact in order to work a plan that included

jackknifing a fucking semi and meeting a traveling MC head on. They had lookouts, and they had inside intel.

The Sons had a mole.

A couple of days before Hap was discharged, Jax and Chibs came in together. They sent Dustin, Hap's current minder, off to get something to eat. They pulled up the two chairs in the room. Hap could read their tension, and he knew they were ready to make an accusation.

Jax spoke. "It's Butch."

Hap sat back hard, making his back twinge. Butch? No way. Butch was straight up club. He was a goddamn rock. Hap knew people, and Butch didn't have even one twitch. But he had an old lady, which meant he had a weak spot. He looked at Chibs, who nodded. "Gotta be, brutha."

"That makes no fuckin' sense. I don't see Butch turnin' on the club. No."

"It's gotta be. Has to be somebody on the run. Only somebody with us could have given enough intel about our timing to make that shit work. Butch was on the phone all morning. And he was the only one on the phone at the pit stop, an hour before we left the interstate."

"Diane is pregnant. He checks on her all the time. Fuck, only reason I wasn't on the phone at the pit, checkin' on Hope, is because my goddamn battery was dead. You need more than that if you want to take a patch like Butch down."

Chibs answered, "We ha' more, Hap. Pep ran Butch's phone. Yer right—all those calls were home. Then Pep ran Diane's phone. Butch called 'er, she called 'er brutha."

Diane's brother was Kevin, the Prospect they'd kicked a couple of months ago.

"Every time, man," added Jax. "Every time. Butch called Diane, Diane called Kevin."

Christ. "Anybody seen Kev since we kicked him?" Both Jax and Chibs shook their heads. "It's not proof it's Butch. Could be anybody in that chain."

"Doesn't matter, Hap. You know that." Jax sat back in his chair. "Butch is the patch. The intel started with him. Say it's Diane. What are we gonna do about her?"

"We're not killin' a fuckin' pregnant woman, I know that!" Hap needed to calm down. He still had the heart monitor on, and he was going to draw attention to the room. He sat back and took steady breaths.

Jax leaned forward again. “Time was, you’d have done it. If the club needed it, you’d have done it.”

Hap knew Jax was right. He’d brutalized a preschooler for the club, for fuck’s sake. But that time was in the far distant past. “You know why I won’t, brother. Are you saying you’d ask me to?”

Jax and Hap stared at each other for long, tense seconds. Jax blinked and sat straight. “No, man. Of course not. But she’s talking to her brother at convenient times. If we get word that Kevin is with the Mayans, then we gotta do something. We all could have been killed. You almost were. There’s no pass here. That shit gets paid.”

Jax was right. If it was true, even if he were innocent of treason, Butch would lose his patch—and that was best case.

Damn, Hap was tired.

-oOo-

Hap’s first chore upon returning to the clubhouse was questioning Butch. They’d found out that Kevin was working with the Mayans. When Hap confronted him, Butch simply sagged and nodded his head. He wasn’t in on it, but he’d worked it out on his own. He hadn’t known Kev had gone to the Mayans. Hap believed him.

It changed little, and Butch knew it; he was the patch. He was the weak link. His relationships had put the club at grave risk. He took the hit for it.

“Hap, bro. I won’t beg for me. But I got a kid comin’. I know Diane didn’t mean harm. Kev’s been working her, making her feel guilty ‘cuz I didn’t stand up for him at his vote. Just please don’t hurt her. I won’t fight what I got comin’, but don’t hurt Diane and my kid.”

Hap said the only thing he could. “We got to vote it, Butch. You know that.”

-oOo-

The Sons sat around the carved table that had been given to the club 50 years ago. The table showed its age and history—gouges from an axe, carved into it by Eli Roosevelt, who had been Sheriff then and was now Chief; a groove from an errant bullet; countless burns from cigarettes, joints, and cigars; the scratch and shine worn in from decades of ringed fists pounding the wood with passion as a point was made or an emotion expressed. The Reaper stood proud in the center, untouched by age or violence.

The empty chair at the far end drew energy from the men in the room like a vacuum. Butch had been patched in almost fifteen years ago. He was a universally respected member of the club. He was a warrior, too, tough and loyal; his loss would be felt keenly.

“All those in favor of taking Butch’s patch?” Jax cut the silence that had overtaken the room. “Aye.”

Starting counterclockwise, as had been the tradition since Jax’s father first sat at the head of a Sons table, Jax moved to Chibs. Hap was the last. He made it unanimous. Butch had lost his patch. Hap would be blacking out his ink before the sun had set.

“Carries. Butch is out.” In a gesture of long habit, Jax, swiped his hand down the length of his face, pulling finally at the point of his long beard. “Way I see, we have two mayhem votes to do. I’m making the assumption we don’t have to vote on Kev. I guess he’s family, though, so I’ll ask. Anybody opposed to putting an end to our ex-errand boy?”

Heads shook, but no one answered. Until Hap said, “We kill the little pussy. Hard.” He looked at Phil, who nodded, his expression intent.

Jax nodded. “Okay. All those in favor of bringing Butch—”

Hap interrupted. “Jax. No need for a vote. It won’t be unanimous for it.” Hap wouldn’t vote to kill Butch, and he didn’t want to see which of his brothers would.

After a beat, Jax said, “Alright. Next doesn’t need to be unanimous. Majority carries. Butch’s old lady, Diane. Kevin’s sister. She’s the one who actually gave the intel to the enemy. She’s eight months pregnant.”

Hap didn’t want to see this vote, either. Knowing full well that there was a time he would have been one of them, Hap didn’t want to know which if any of his brothers would vote to kill a pregnant woman.

This time, Jax didn’t vote first. He looked at Chibs, who said “Nay,” without hesitation.

Tig was next. He did hesitate, for a measurable time. “Can’t do it, man. Nay.”

Hap was relieved when that vote was unanimous, too.

Jax leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “We’re agreed, then. Butch is excommunicated. Hap—you do his ink before he goes. We give him a week to get his family out of town. We’re done here.”

-oOo-

Butch got a sendoff no other excommunicated Son had ever gotten—after Hap blacked his ink, they shared a drink with him and he left through a gauntlet of manly hugs. When he was gone, Hap sat next to Tig at the bar. He needed to get home; his whole left side was a solid ache, and his head was pounding. But something was off with Tig.

All the Prospects were guarding family—Beau was with Laura at Chibs’ house in Lodi, Dustin with Hope, Frank, and her kids, and Kong was with Tara, Gemma, and the boys—so the bar was self-serve. Tig was drinking straight out of a Jack bottle. Hap cracked open another and poured himself a glass. He was not hanging around here to get drunk.

Hap put his hand on Tig’s back. “What’s up, brother?”

Tig took a big swallow and turned to Hap. “I’m done, Hap. I want out.”

Any other time, Hap would have been sure he had misheard his friend. If he hadn’t misheard, he would have fought. Tig not a Son? Didn’t compute. But now Hap understood. He said nothing.

“I’m 70 years old, brother. I am *tired* of being shot at. I’m tired of watching my back. I’m tired of votes like these. I’m just *tired*. Desi wants me to go to France, live with her there. That’s what I want. Sit with her and watch the sunset. Fuck in the garden. Shit like that. Fuck somebody I love while I can still get it up.”

Hap was tired, too. Bone tired. Tired in his soul. But he didn’t have anything or anyone else to keep him sane. Hope was growing up. She’d leave him eventually—she’d leave him soon. Maybe not far, but far enough to leave him alone in that house. She said he was making a family with Frank, and he supposed in a way that was true, but it wasn’t the same. It was half measures. Frank didn’t want more than that, and neither did he. His life had started to roll up when Vivian died. If he had to keep a foot in it, he needed SAMCRO to occupy his mind.

Tig had never been the same after Desi left. In some ways, Hap had thought the change an okay thing—his friend was more subdued. More thoughtful. Their relationship had been short and volatile, but it had always been clear that Desi was Tig’s one true.

Hap couldn’t imagine the club without Tig, but if he could have Desi, then Hap would send him off gladly.

“I’m too old to die a warrior, Hap. I don’t want it, not anymore. I want to die quiet, in bed with my old lady. All I want from here is to be able to keep my ink.”

Hap clinked his glass against Tig’s bottle. “I got your back, brother.”

## CHAPTER 29: Hope

Abel closed the door and pushed Hope against it, leaning into her body to kiss her, his hands on either side of her head. She liked it when he framed her like this. She didn't know why, but it made her feel warm—like, cozy—and also hot.

She hooked her arms around his neck and focused on the feel of him, his tongue in her mouth, his beard on her lips and cheeks, his chest against hers, the seams of his kutte sharpened by his weight leaning on her. She whimpered.

His mouth still interlocked with hers, he chuckled. He pulled back a fraction of an inch. “That’s a great sound you make. I know you’re wet when you make that sound.”

Well, that was embarrassing. She could feel the heat rushing to her cheeks. Great, blushing. That was more embarrassing, and her cheeks got hotter. She turned her face away.

“Aw, babe, no. Don’t be embarrassed. It’s hot. Makes me think dirty thoughts. Come on—I’ll show you.” He took her hand and started to lead her away from the door.

Hope pulled back. “Wait a sec. Do laundry recently?”

He laughed. “Fresh sheets this morning. You know, just in case.”

“Good. You know you’re a pig, right?” She looked around at the main space in Abel’s new apartment, which served as kitchen, dining, and living areas. There was also a bedroom and a bathroom. “This place looks like the clubhouse on Saturday morning.”

Just more than a month ago, she’d sent Abel a text hoping that it wasn’t too late for them to stay together. She’d stayed awake all night afterwards rehearsing in her head what she’d say if he would talk to her, and practicing responses to what he might say as well. That talk had been brutally derailed when he’d pulled up to Frank’s looking shaken. Alone, filthy, wearing a serious expression terrifying in its familiarity, he’d taken her hands and asked her to sit down.

She’d been sure her father was dead. The sense of *déjà vu*, returning her to the day he’d told Frank about Juice, had been so strong she thought she’d pass out. But he wasn’t dead. It had been a close call; he’d lost a lot of blood, but he’d pulled through. Now he seemed strong as ever, though he seemed older to her than he ever had.

Abel had been steady for her while her dad was sick, but they hadn’t talked about what was between them. They’d been more like friends than anything. He’d gone ahead and rented an apartment—the one across from the swings, as it turned out—but she hadn’t seen it until a couple of weeks ago. After they’d finally talked.

Hope loved him. She felt sure of that now. It had sucked to feel she'd lost him, even briefly; it hurt her in ways she'd never felt before. And when she was scared about her dad, it was Abel she needed. But he'd been moving much too fast for her. She wasn't ready to move in with him. Nowhere near it.

He'd been happy to hear she loved him, and he'd backed off the moving-in idea. Since then, these past two weeks or so, things were good again.

He hooked her belt loops and pulled her against him. "Needs a woman's touch."

She rolled her eyes and leaned away. "Abel . . ."

Laughing, with that damn cocky smile she loved, he pulled her back. "I know, I know. Not pushing. You know I want you here. Hey, though—maybe you could just clean up when you're over."

She swatted at his arm. "You can clean your own mess. Butthead."

"We gotta work on your cussin', babe." He fed his fingers into her hair.

A thought entered her head unbidden, surprising her. She knew it would shock Abel. She liked the idea of shocking him, and she poked at the thought a little, to see if she was ready for it. Then she smiled. "I could call you a cocksucker. Or would you rather I just do it?"

Yep; he was shocked. His smile faded slowly, and she could see him trying to decide if he was understanding her. Giving Abel a blow job was a big step for Hope. She was worried she'd be terrible at it, maybe hurt him. Plus, it seemed pretty gross. Really, the whole sex thing was still new for her. She'd looked stuff up online, trying to learn some things and not be a total dork with him.

But that was just scary. There was some very weird stuff online. People freaked her out.

She'd admitted to him that she'd done some homework, and he'd teased her. Then he'd told her he liked that she didn't know that stuff, that he liked to teach her, and that they were doing plenty of stuff he liked, so he didn't need anything she wasn't ready for.

Maybe she didn't have a lot of experience with love and sex, but she knew she was lucky. She had a good guy. Though she'd wouldn't have believed it a year ago, Abel Teller was a good guy. And she thought she was ready for this.

"Do you still want me to do that?" She was feeling shy, though, ready or not.

"Jesus God, yes." He took a breath. "I mean, if you're sure you want to."

She nodded, and that was all he needed before he was pulling her back to his bedroom.

He had changed his sheets and even made his bed, more or less. Now that they were in his bedroom, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, walking her backwards to the bed, unbuttoning her top as they went.

When her legs hit the bed, he lifted her and laid her down. She took over her undressing, and he watched while he took his own clothes off, hanging his kutte on the back of his desk chair. She didn't feel shy any longer when she was naked with Abel. They still hadn't had many chances yet, but now that she understood her own feelings better, she felt more comfortable with him just in general, including when her clothes were off.

He stretched out alongside her and put his hand on her hip, leaning in for a gentle kiss. He was hard already. Really hard.

“You sure about this, babe?” He brushed his hand down her arm.

Hope was scared, but sure. She nodded. “I don't know what to do, though.”

He rolled onto his back, tucking an arm under his head, and Hope felt a tremor in his other hand as he dropped it from her arm. “Hold me with your hand and take me into your mouth. Try to cover your teeth if you can. You can kiss, lick, suck—it'll all feel good.”

She sat up at his hip, feeling nervous. She wrapped her hand around him—hand jobs she understood now, pretty well—and he groaned and raised his hips a little. She looked up at his face—he was watching her, his blue eyes bright and intense. “Don't be mad if I screw this up, okay?”

He brushed her hair back over her shoulder. “Hey, babe—I won't be mad. And you don't have to do this.”

“I want to.” She bent forward and put her lips on the tip. Abel sucked in a breath. Experimentally, she licked the smooth skin around the tip and then sucked just that much into her mouth.

“God, Hope. Yeah, that's it.” He was still watching her; now he was biting his lower lip. Emboldened by the way his body shook and how much harder he'd gotten in her hand and mouth, she licked up and down his shaft and flicked her tongue over his tip. Her hair fell forward over her shoulder, making a screen between her and his face, and he rasped, “Move your hair, babe. I want to watch.” She pulled her hair to hang over her other shoulder.

She practiced covering her teeth as she sucked on his tip until she felt like she understood that. Then she tried sucking more of him into her mouth. He shouted, his hands becoming fists. He was bigger than she could take in, but she wrapped both hands one on top of the other, starting at the base; then she could get the rest.

She thought maybe she was doing okay. Abel was starting to writhe and chant under his breath. His legs were shaking. His eyes had closed, so he wasn't watching anymore. She put a hand around his balls and felt them get really hard, and then he was sitting up part way, pulling on her arm, groaning, "Back off, back off. Babe, you gotta back off now!"

She did, blushing furiously, sure she'd done something stupid, painful, or deviant. Abel grabbed himself and pumped hard a couple of times, then came all over his belly.

Great. She was so bad at it that he had to finish it himself. She turned and sat on the side of the bed, her back to him, feeling stupid and ashamed.

"Hope, what's wrong?" He was breathless, and the question came out like a gasp.

She didn't turn around. "I'm sorry."

"What? Why?" He wrapped a hand around her arm and pulled. "Come here, babe."

She couldn't very well sit on the edge of his bed, and she wasn't going to sneak out of his apartment, so she turned and let him pull her to settle with her head on his chest. He was wiping himself off with a t-shirt.

"Why are you sorry?"

It was a stupid question, but he couldn't see her rolling her eyes. "Because I was so bad at it you had to finish it yourself." Duh.

Tossing the t-shirt aside, he lifted his head and turned hers so she could see his face. "You were *not* bad at it. It felt amazing. So good, Hope. For real. I backed you off because I was ready to come, and I didn't want to do it in your mouth. That's a lot to ask for your first time." Brushing her hair back, he kissed her forehead. "No, babe, you did great. Thank you."

He rolled and flipped them so he was on top of her. "Now, what can I do for you?"

-oOo-

Later, they were sated and exhausted, and Abel had tucked her back snug against his chest, pulling his legs up behind her thighs until she was curled into the curve of him. Hope dozed lightly as he stroked her arm. She'd set the alarm on her phone, so they could relax now and nap if they wanted. But there was a thought creeping around in the back of her head. She'd controlled it until now, locked it away, but after what she'd done for him this afternoon, it seemed to have gotten loose.

Without turning or even opening her eyes, she asked, "Did you do what you said you were going to do?"

He lifted his head and kissed her shoulder, “What?”

“When you dropped me off that day. After apartment hunting. Did you do what you said you were going to do?” Her heart was starting to pound, and she felt something turning in her belly. She wished she hadn’t asked. She didn’t want to know. She realized it would hurt too much to know. She wanted to take the question back, but now it was out there and needed an answer.

Abel rolled to his back, releasing her, and she thought she had her answer. She sat up and pulled the sheet up to cover herself. God, she wished she hadn’t asked. She wouldn’t be able to unhear this once he told her.

“No.” Hope turned, shocked. The look on his face didn’t match the relief she felt at that word. He looked guilty.

“I tried. I went looking, and I had a girl.” Again, the twist in her belly and the pound in her chest. “I started, but I didn’t go through with it. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry if you didn’t go through with it?”

He looked thoughtful, and then he shrugged. “I’m sorry for being such a dick that day. It was a mean thing to say and a shitty thing to try to do. I was hurt and mad, but I was still a dick, and I’m sorry.”

Now, she felt real relief, and she lay down again, tucking herself under his arm. “It’s okay. Must be hard to go cold turkey from such a long habit of being a dick.”

Laughing, he kissed her head. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that, too. I grew up pretty jealous of you, everybody treating you like some kind of national treasure since the day you were born. It made me mean, I guess. You should be a spoiled little princess. Not sure how you’re not.”

Hope got quiet, feeling tense and suddenly sad as she put some things together in her head. She had never felt spoiled. She’d never felt like she was treated any differently, but she understood why she might have been.

She must have been sending off vibes, because Abel put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face to his. “Hey, didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. You’re not a princess, babe. You’re pretty amazing. You’re not like any other girl I know. I don’t want anybody but you.”

She sat up and turned to face him. “I have a story to tell you. But you can’t talk about it to anybody but me, okay? Promise?” Abel nodded, and Hope told him the story her dad had once told her and had never mentioned again—the story of him, her mom, her older sister, and her own birth.

-oOo-

When Hope mounted behind Abel, she saw her dad's jaw twitch, and she knew he was jealous. They were riding out to Uncle Jax and Aunt Tara's house for Thanksgiving dinner. He didn't like that she didn't ride bitch with him anymore. But he was going to have to deal—besides, it was weird for her dad to be jealous of her boyfriend.

Anyway, he was only riding partway with them. He was going to break away and head out to Frank's so he could shadow her and the kids on their way. Things were tense around the club lately. Hope didn't know the details, but she knew she was in the company of a Son or a Prospect just about 24/7 these days, so it must be something big. The thing that got her father shot and almost killed. Big.

They were stopped at a stoplight, front of the line, their bikes abreast, when a pickup pulled up in the lane next to Abel and Hope. They were rowdy, and Hope looked over. Three guys—young, Abel's age at most. The one nearest the window leaned out and shouted to Hope, "Great ass, baby—bet it's tight!" He and his buddies whooped it up over that funny line.

Sometimes boys were extremely stupid. To say that to a girl riding bitch with a biker in a kutte? That guy went back for thirds at the stupid buffet.

Abel looked at her dad. Her dad looked at Abel. Even with his sunglasses on, Hope could see murder in her dad's face. The dead boys in the pickup continued to laugh and whoop. Abel turned back to her. "Get off. Now. Go straight into the mini-mart and wait."

She didn't question. She swung off and trotted through the stopped traffic just as the light turned green. Once she hit the sidewalk she turned back to see that the pickup had turned left, and her dad and boyfriend had crossed traffic to follow. She went into the mini-mart on the corner, got herself a soda, and stood near the window to wait.

About twenty minutes later, Abel and her dad pulled into the parking lot. They dismounted, and Hope saw something amazing. Her dad threw his arm over Abel's shoulder. And he was *smiling*. They both were. And they looked unscathed. A little dusty, but that's it.

She met them just outside the door, and Abel pulled her into his arms. "You ready to get going, babe?"

She looked at her boyfriend. She looked at her dad. They looked like they just had a great time. Her dad was favoring his left side a little, but not bad. "Are there bodies to dispose of?"

Her dad chuckled. "Naw, midge. Just a little lesson in respect. You ready?"

“Yep. Let’s ride.” Hope liked living in a world where assholes didn’t get away with it.

-oOo-

Thomas was home for Thanksgiving, but he wasn’t even staying through the weekend—he’d come in on Wednesday evening and he was driving out again Saturday morning, because his girlfriend had some kind of function in LA that night.

Though they’d kept in touch online and on the phone, Hope hadn’t seen him since Juice’s funeral. He looked different. She’d always thought he was the better looking brother, not that she’d ever thought of him as anything more than her best friend. Only friend. But he was really good looking. He had his mom’s coloring—dark hair, green eyes—and he was a couple of inches taller than Abel’s six feet. He’d been an athlete since grade school, and he was built like one.

He’d always kept his hair short, and he’d never had facial hair. But Hope was shocked to see him today. His hair was styled differently, with an obviously expensive cut. He was wearing khakis. Khakis. Hope didn’t think people in khakis, that weren’t uniform pants, were even allowed around the Sons. At least he wasn’t wearing a polo shirt. It was a blue oxford, tucked in, sleeves cuffed.

Yep. He was a lawyer. A wannabe, at least.

He came right up to her, though, and gave her a huge, warm hug. “Oh, I missed you, Hopie.” Hope felt like a jerk for all the things she’d just been thinking, all the ways she’d provoked bickering when they’d talked these last months. He’d been her friend and protector her whole childhood. If he was happy in this new, fancy life he was making, she should be happy for him. Even if it meant they didn’t click like they used to. She hugged him back, and he lifted her off her feet.

Over Thomas’s shoulder, Hope could see Abel watching them. He was sulking. Already. She sighed and pushed on Thomas’s shoulders until he set her back down. She saw that her dad was watching whatever was going on between her, Thomas, and Abel right now, too. He looked amused.

Thomas asked, “Do you have to go do kitchen stuff, or can you talk?”

“I can talk.” He took her hand and led her out to the deck, and Abel turned and stalked to the family room, where the bar was. Oh, well.

She and Thomas sat down on a long built-in bench along the side of the deck, and he started right in. “So, since I saw you last, you dropped out of school and started banging my reprobate brother. That’s your life plan, Hope?”

So much for wishing him well. “Wait. You’re actually going to start another lecture three minutes after we saw each other? Thomas, don’t be a dick.” She scooted away and crossed her arms, trying not to just bolt.

“I have to, Hopie. You’re so smart. You’re so much better than all this. You should go to college, where you’ll see that. There’s so much great stuff you could do. It kills me that you’re just a dropout biker chick.”

Hope realized that this was really the end of her one and only true friendship, and tears came up on her face. She fought and mastered them, and, when she could speak, she turned to him. “I got my GED. Perfect score.”

“Because you’re so damn smart. Well, that’s something. At least you could go to community college, get started there.”

She shook her head. “No, Thomas. It’s not what I want. You know, I was thinking when I got here that I should stop judging you for becoming the prissy shit you’ve become, with your blow-dried hair, and your bosses and their yachts, and your sorority girlfriend, and your khakis and loafers. But you judge me. You judge all of us. Your *family*. You’re an asshole, Thomas. You’re the one who’s not enough.”

He laughed. “You’re wrong, Hope. I’m more. I’m better than this. You could be, too. You could be anything. Instead, you’re just a Crow Eater.”

Rage came up her spine so fast it made her dizzy. She wanted to tear his face off. But she was devastated, too. She felt flattened, and she understood that she was going to lose the fight against her tears. She’d die before she cried in front of him, so she said, barely above a whisper, “Fuck you, Thomas.”

“Oh, witty riposte that was.” He sat back, arms crossed, looking smug, but also sad. Hope didn’t care if he felt sad. He was a jerk. She got up and went inside.

Abel was standing about three feet inside the back door, and when he saw her face and the tears she’d lost hold of, he set her aside and charged out. Hope turned to see him take a huge swing at his younger brother, and then Thomas was on the deck, blood gushing from his nose. Abel turned and came back inside. “You okay, babe?”

Yes, Hope liked living in a world where assholes didn’t get away with it. She should have flattened Thomas herself. She could have. But he’d hurt her where it counted and made her weak. She was more pissed about that, she thought, than anything.

She caught her dad’s eye. After a considering look, he raised his eyebrows, asking if she was okay. She nodded and laid her head on Abel’s shoulder.

-oOo-

Thanksgiving dinner wasn't derailed by the altercation between Thomas and Abel. It was hardly the first time fists had flown and blood had been spilled at a Sons family holiday meal. It was like a tradition. Aunt Tara cleaned Thomas up, and then he found himself a corner. Hope ignored him.

Everybody fussed over Frank. Hope was starting to get used to it. If she worked hard enough, she could make herself believe, with everybody else, that the baby could only be Juice's. Frank had recently found out it was a boy. The Sons were thrilled and had started calling him Juicy Junior.

Hope's dad was fighting melancholy all day; she could see it. She felt it, too. They were starting the first holiday season without her mom. It was hard not to think of where she'd be if she were here. Every time she started to feel overwhelmed by the empty space her mom should be filling, Abel was there, his hand on her. Like he could tell. And it helped.

Her dad didn't have that, though. That was what he'd lost.

She went over to him, and he took her in his arms, holding her tight. She could practically feel his loss in the way his arms held her.

After dinner, while Hope was helping clean up in the kitchen and the Sons were in the family room watching football and starting their drunk, her dad came in. "Hey, midge, come outside for a minute and talk to me?" She wiped her hands, and Eileen, Chibs' daughter, smiled and took the towel from her and began drying dishes in her place. As he led her out the front—which was weird, no place really to sit out front—she noticed that her uncles were standing in the entryway to the family room, watching her and her dad go out the front door.

When they got outside, her dad said, "Hey, midge. Catch." She turned, and he tossed something to her. She caught it reflexively. A key ring, with a key and an old-fashioned car fob, to lock and unlock the doors. She looked up at her dad, and he nodded to the street.

There was a small pickup parked in front of the house. It was old, but it was shiny. Black. Roll bar. Purple flames painted on the front fender. Half the size of the SUV she'd learned to drive. It was brilliant. It was perfect. She turned; her dad was smiling.

"Turns out, you were right. I need the SUV sometimes. And you did your GED like I asked, and rocked the shit out of it. You're driving much better now, and you'll be able to get your real license soon. So that's your early Christmas present." He smirked. "Steel reinforced." She was speechless. She couldn't even move.

He walked up and stood next to her, his arm around her shoulders. "I need one favor, midget." She turned and looked up at him, still unable to speak. His expression hurt her heart. He looked proud and sad, and she could feel his love for her like heat. "Don't leave me, midge. Not yet. Know I don't have a right to ask, but I'm not ready."

She laid her head on his chest. “I won’t, Daddy. I’m not ready, either. I love you.”

“Ah, midge. Love you.” He squeezed her tight and led her to her new truck.

There was a purple phoenix painted on the hood.

## CHAPTER 30: Frank

Frank eased Nora's door closed and released the latch as close to silently as she could get. Her little girl was picking a really terrible time to think about giving up naps, when Mama was in her third trimester. But she was down this afternoon, after three books. Nora had had a busy morning at playgroup, so Frank had hopes that this nap would at least be a couple of hours long.

She was having a pretty good day. In fact, this pregnancy had so far been a lot easier than when she was carrying Leo and Nora. Before, by this point, she'd been half bedridden with back pain. This time, she was holding up fairly well, and had been feeling okay since the morning sickness passed. She guess her body was getting used to making humans. Not that there'd be any more after this little guy.

J.J. She'd been thinking of him as J.J. since Chibs started calling him Juicy Junior and the rest of the club picked it up. She knew what his name would be, and those weren't the right initials, but she had a feeling J.J. was how he'd be known. Dooming the kid to a life of explaining his nickname before he was even born. Eh. Join the club, little bean. Join the club.

This holiday season was kicking her heart's ass, though. Juice loved Christmas. He loved it so much he'd practically still believed in Santa Claus—especially after the kids were with them. He'd decorated every room, every surface. It had been like living in Santa's workshop for a month and a half.

Not this year. She and the kids put up a tree and their stockings. Between her cumbersome belly and her cumbersome heart, that was all she'd been able to muster, and that only with Dustin's help. Some jerky little shit at school had hipped Leo to the no-Santa thing, but he'd taken it with his typical steadiness and had now devoted himself to making sure that Nora's belief was ironclad and jerk-proof. She worried about her boy sometimes. He wasn't a talker. He was a watcher. She worried about what might be roiling underneath that still surface.

Frank checked in on Dustin, sitting in the living room watching some reality show. She always found it unsettling to have a minder. It wasn't that she disliked Dustin, though she didn't know him well at all, since he'd become a Prospect after Juice died, or even that she was unused to having random Sons in her house—though the traffic had lightened up a lot since she was a widow, there hadn't been a week that passed without at least three different Sons traipsing through at some point, at least to check in. And Happy was around a lot. But having a minder like this meant big trouble with the club. Happy had gotten gravely hurt because of it. Frank didn't think she could deal with more loss.

She went into the dining room, where Leo had his miniatures and painting supplies set up. She thought it was time to think about getting him set up with a more serious art station in his room. Not her loft—she needed that space for herself—but there was good light in his room. He was showing talent and interest. She didn't want to get too

enthusiastic and push him where he didn't want to go, but more and more she saw him gravitating to artistic pastimes. His painting of these tiny miniatures was precise and detailed. It wasn't sophisticated; his coloring and design was pretty basic, until one remembered that he wasn't even eight years old yet, but his technique was excellent. That's what she'd noticed, an impressive attention to detail, and a patience she'd never had.

He was painting a dragon now, using black, reds, and oranges, doing really nice shading of the scales. "Hey, doodle. That's really good."

Leo looked up with his normally serious expression. Her eldest smiled rarely, which was a damn shame, since he had his daddy's USDA Prime smile. "Thanks. He's supposed to be an ice dragon, but I decided to make him fire instead."

"I see that. I like the way his scales look charred around his mouth."

"Well, they would, I think. They're fireproof, but they'd still get smoke and stuff on them."

"Exactly. Hey, speaking of smoke and stuff, I thought I'd bake some Christmas cookies. Wanna take a break and help me out? Could use a taster. And somebody to help me with the sprinkles."

He considered her request, then nodded. "Okay, Mama. I need to clean my supplies first, though."

Frank brushed his thick hair back from his forehead. "Okay. I'll get started in the kitchen. Be sure to wash your hands first."

He gave her a look. "I know."

She was on her tablet, scrolling through Christmas cookie recipes, when Leo came in and pulled up a chair to stand on at the counter. He looked over her shoulder to see what she was doing and asked, "Can we make the ones that Dad liked?"

Startled, Frank turned to her boy. He never talked about his dad. He never seemed to want to talk about his dad. Carefully, she said, "Black and white cookies, they're called. I don't know. Let's take a look." She searched for a recipe and checked the ingredients list. "Oh, Leo. There's a lot here we don't have. But I'll get everything we need tomorrow, okay?"

For the briefest second, Leo looked crestfallen. The look passed quickly, but Frank saw it, and her battered heart took another hit. "I'm sorry, doodle. How about sugar cookies? We can make them like ornaments and decorate them with frosting and glitter sprinkles. I have all that stuff."

“Okay, Mama.” He got off the chair and started to get out the bowls and utensils. Frank read over the recipe and realized that the dough needed to set for a few hours before they could do the decorating part. Lovely. She was making a fuckup of this whole idea.

But Leo took it without evident disappointment, content to help her measure and mix, and then wait until later to do the fun parts. They waited until Nora was in bed for the night. She’d demanded that Leo and Frank both read to her, so they’d each read a book. Frank was starting to get the sense that she might need to change her approach to her daughter’s demanding nature, but Frank wanted her strong and willful. Already, not yet three, Nora took shit from no one. She was a happy, enthusiastic little girl, too, utterly fearless, and Frank was a little jealous. But the child was exhausting.

Nora dropped off with her head in Leo’s lap. He was such a good brother. Nora was devoted to him, and he was content to let her tag along with him. He knew how to keep her occupied and happy while he did his thing, too. There was peace between them. He watched out for her. She saw her and Garrett in Nora and Leo—the way they were before Garrett tore her heart into pieces, anyway.

She hadn’t heard from him since Leo was a baby. Sometimes she regretted telling him she was done, but she hated that he’d stayed away all those years, only to come crawling back when his marriage was over. He was weak. And he didn’t fight her when she told him to go. But he’d been her hero until he’d turned his back. She wanted that kind of relationship for her kids. She wondered how J.J. would change things for everyone.

Frank eased Nora off Leo’s lap and tucked her in. They sneaked quietly out, and Frank closed the door. “You still want to help me with the cookies?”

His brows tightened thoughtfully, Leo said, “My bedtime is coming up soon.”

Early reports indicated that Leo would not be an outlaw. Frank smiled. “Well, it’s Friday, so I’m okay if you stay up, if you want to.” Leo nodded, and they went to the kitchen.

They cut the dough into circles and diamonds so that they could make ornaments. While they were decorating them, Frank screwed up her maternal courage and asked her son a question she had not asked in all the time since Juice’s death. “Hey, doodle, you ever want to talk about your dad?”

Leo was adding silver sprinkles to an ornament he’d frosted blue. He stopped in mid pinch, but he didn’t look up right away. He said, “I talk about him. We talked about his cookies before.”

“I know, Leo. I just wondered if you had questions, or anything you wish you could say. You could tell me, or ask me, whatever you wanted.”

He shrugged and went back to his sprinkles, having never looked up. Frank didn’t know what to do. With her own history, she felt like she should have a better handle on what to

say to help her kid, but nope. She was lost. So she let him do his cookies, and they worked quietly.

Several minutes later, he said, his voice low, still not looking up, “Sometimes I feel really mad.”

Frank set down the cookie she was working on and looked at her boy. “Mad about what, doodle?” He shook his head. She tried something. “I feel really mad, too, sometimes. Mad about what happened. And mad at him for not being here. Then I get extra mad at myself for being mad at him.”

Leo looked up. “Yeah.”

“I mean it, doodle. You can tell me anything.”

He shook his head. “You’re sad a lot. I don’t want to make you sadder.” Jesus Christ, she was a terrible mother. Her seven-year-old was burying his shit to protect her.

She was going to cry, but she dropped her arms under the table and used her old trick of pinching herself until the urge passed. No tears. Tears right now would be horrible. “Oh, baby. You can’t. You can only make me happier.”

He worked on another cookie; Frank just watched him, pinching herself black and blue.

As he selected the sprinkles he wanted, he said, “I liked the way he read stories. He did good voices.”

Frank laughed, surprised and charmed. “He did. Remember his Grover?” Frank tried, and failed, to mimic it, but Leo laughed, his eyes meeting hers and lighting up, and she saw his father beaming back at her. Her heart spasmed.

They spent the next two hours remembering Juice; even after the cookies were done, they sat at the table and told stories about Leo’s dad. It was the best, hardest, most beautiful, wrenchingly painful two hours Frank had spent since his funeral. But she didn’t cry. Neither did Leo.

When she finally tucked him in, after reading a chapter of *The Golden Compass* with him, he grabbed her hand as she was pulling away. “Sometimes I get really mad at Nora. She doesn’t care.”

Surreptitiously pinching her arm again—she was going to have to wear long sleeves for weeks—Frank sat down on his bed. “She’s too little, doodle. She doesn’t understand what she lost.” Nora had completely stopped mentioning her daddy. She was forgetting him.

“I know. I don’t want to be a bad brother, but I can’t help it. J.J. isn’t ever going to know about Dad. What if I get mad at him, too?”

“As long as you don’t do mean things when you’re mad, then getting mad at people you love is totally normal, Leo. Even getting mad when it feels like you shouldn’t. It doesn’t make you a bad brother. You’re the best brother. If you feel mad, just take some time for yourself. Talk to me, if you want. Or Grandpa Hap.”

He thought about that for a second, then nodded. “Grandpa Hap is cool. He doesn’t do voices when he reads, though.”

Frank laughed. “No, he definitely does not. But yeah, he’s very cool.” Leo’s eyes drooped. “Okay, doodle. I’ll see you in the morning. Love you, love you.”

“Love you, love you, Mama. Don’t be sad.” She kissed his forehead and turned out his light.

When Frank finally got to the sanctuary of her own bedroom, she collapsed in a heap on the floor and cried out hours of withheld tears.

-oOo-

Happy came over for dinner on his own the next night, relieving Dustin for the evening. He was over for at least a few hours four or five times a week, more frequently as her pregnancy advanced. This time, he drove his SUV over and brought into her house a giant, plastic, light-up reindeer. Nora saw it and squealed. “RUDOLPH! MAMA, GRAMPY BROUGHT RUDOLPH!”

“Yes, he did.” She looked at Happy. “And why did Grampy bring Rudolph?”

Happy nodded at Nora, who was jumping up and down and clapping her hands. “That.”

“Suck-up.”

“Yep.” He positioned it in the corner near the Christmas tree and plugged it in.

“Isn’t that supposed to be an outside decoration?”

“Sure, but she’ll like it better in here.”

“GRAMPY, WANNA RIDE RUDOLPH!”

Happy squatted down. “Come here, little miss.” Nora ran full-tilt into his arms, almost knocking him over. He put his arm around her and tweaked one of her pigtails. “I need you to use your inside voice. Grampy’s ears are old. Might break ‘em.”

Nora patted his ears and whispered, *Sorry, Grampy.*

“Good. Now, no riding Rudolph. Rudolph goes away if you even *try* to climb up on him, understand?”

After a little poochy-lipped pout, Nora whispered, *Can I pet him?*

“You can pet him. And you don’t have to whisper, missy. Inside voice.” He turned her loose, and she trotted over to lavish love and adoration on her new plastic pet. Frank rolled her eyes and went into the dining room to pour Happy a glass of Jack.

As she was pouring, J.J. gave her a really hard kick and then rolled. It hurt. A lot. Before she could stop herself, she cried out and grabbed her stomach, dropping the glass and making a mess. Happy was there as she was trying to ease herself into a chair.

“What’s wrong, little girl?” He helped her sit and squatted in front of her, his hands on her belly.

“I’m okay. Just getting abused by my own child.” J.J. kicked again, right under Happy’s hand. He smiled, then frowned in concern when Frank grunted.

“Is it normal for that to hurt so much?” He rubbed her belly as if trying to soothe the beast inside her. It soothed her, at least.

“Normal for me, yeah. I’m getting off light so far this time, though. It was a lot worse with Leo and Nora. I really am okay.”

He stood and kissed her head. “You’re not cooking. I’m calling Dustin back, have him bring something out. What do you want?”

“Could we have pizza, Grandpa Hap?” Leo was right behind him, seemingly unaware that Frank was in discomfort. Pizza it was.

-oOo-

After pizza and black and white cookies, and a game of Candyland, Happy and Frank divvied up the bedtimes, Happy with Leo and Frank with Nora, who’d gotten to stay up a little later than usual. They met back in the living room, Frank with some peppermint tea, and Happy with a glass of Jack. Frank turned out the lamps, leaving only the colored lights of the Christmas tree, and Rudolph, to illuminate the room. She felt soothed by the quiet and the glow. She laid her head back and sighed, rubbing her belly with her free hand.

Happy put his hand on her belly for a moment. “Dustin asked for the night off. Found himself an easy lay at the pizza place. You mind if it’s me taking up your couch tonight?”

“Dustin called *you* and asked if he could get laid instead of working, and you said yes?”

“That a problem? I’ll call him in if you’d rather have him here.”

“No, Happy. It’s fine—good, even. It’s just that there was a time you’d have reached through the phone and pulled his tongue out for even asking. You’re getting sweet in your golden years.”

“Fuck you, little girl.” He pushed at her leg.

“What about Hope? You leaving her alone?” Frank knew that couldn’t be true.

His smile was on the grim side. “I called her. She was excessively okay with my not coming home. She’s safe, with Abel. He’ll stay with her—at our house.”

She didn’t want to lose ground with Hope. If she was thinking that Happy was staying here overnight for any other reason . . . “It wasn’t weird?”

Happy shook his head. “Not for her. She knows now what you and I are. She understands. But I just gave her the okay for her boyfriend to stay over, so it was weird as fuck for me.” He took a long swallow of Jack.

“Why’d you okay all this, then?”

Staring at the tree, he shrugged. “She’s safe. You’re safe. Dustin needs to get laid. The kid’s gettin’ squirrely.”

“That’s all surprisingly mellow, coming from you, Happy.”

“Somethin’ new I’m tryin’.”

“And how’s that working out for you?” She rubbed his shoulder, and he closed his eyes.

He chuckled. “In progress.”

They were quiet. Frank studied the glowing tree, recalling the history of each distinct ornament, and thinking about past Christmases. She supposed she’d been lucky to have as long with Juice as she did. Sons lived a precarious life. “Seems like the shit is pretty high with the club lately—for a couple of months now.”

Happy took a deep breath, as if she’d stirred him from a doze. “Yeah. It’s complicated. You know it gets like this sometimes.”

“I know not to ask, you know that. I just—I’m not sure I can take another hit. I don’t want to lose you, Happy.” There’d been enough loss in her life. Enough.

He regarded her silently, in his way. She knew he wouldn't answer. She'd know that he wouldn't mind so much getting lost. She understood. After a few seconds, she changed the subject.

"Damn, Dustin was going to go with us to IKEA in the morning. I need stuff for the new nursery. Nora's still using the stuff we have. Time to get that started. I guess it won't hurt to put it off another day or two, though."

"I'll take you."

That was maybe the worst idea in the history of ideas. Frank flashed on an image of Happy wandering the monstrous maze of IKEA in December. She shuddered. "No, Happy. I said *IKEA*. That would be like putting a bull in a room full of red flags. Almost literally."

He lightly slapped her thigh with the back of his hand. "Hey, you called me sweet and old—and mellow. How much danger could I be?"

"Have you ever been to IKEA?"

He shook his head. "But I've been in department stores before. It'll be fine. I want to help."

Against her better judgment, Frank realized that she wanted to go shopping for baby stuff with him. "Okay, but I should bring a tranq gun."

-oOo-

A tranq gun almost would have come in handy, as it turned out. It had been touch and go all through the store, Happy vibrating with tension, the muscle in his jaw twitching madly, but he'd held it together. He'd been appalled at the idea that they were leaving the children in the playroom, but she marched him onward, insisting that the kids enjoyed themselves there, were well attended, and would be fine.

Then, at the very end, there was a bad moment. He was loading the back of his SUV with flat, heavy boxes containing what would become nursery furniture. She had a couple of Christmas presents in the pile, too. A benefit of shopping at IKEA was that the kids weren't around when you were picking out stuff, and when you actually were buying it, most of it was in a blank box.

The kids were in the back seat, the middle section of which was stacked with new linens. Frank had wanted to pick up some cute toys, but she didn't need both Happy and Nora on meltdown alert, and Nora would not deal well with the idea that a toy was not hers. It was something Frank was going to have to address before J.J. joined them. Now, though, she was standing near the back of the truck, intending to take the empty cart to a corral when Happy was done.

They had a decent parking spot, and the lot was full. Someone pulled up, waiting for their spot. The driver, in a little compact, waited, oh, about fifteen seconds before he started to honk. Happy turned, and Frank knew he was delivering his patented death stare. Should have done the trick. But people were stupid, and Christmas-shopping people were stupider. The guy was feeling ragey, apparently, and flipped him off. Seemingly calm—but Frank knew better—Happy went to the back seat and grabbed his kutte. He shrugged it on as he walked toward the compact.

Frank didn't know why the guy, who was clearly rethinking his recent life choices, didn't just step on the gas, but he didn't. He sat there and waited for Happy to break his nose. But Happy just leaned in, grabbed the guy by the collar and said something. Frank couldn't hear what, but when Happy stepped away, the guy was ashy pale and looked like he might cry. Happy walked calmly back, closed the hatch, took off his kutte, put it in the back seat, and opened Frank's door. "You ready, little girl?"

Impressed and a little freaked out, Frank got in. Happy went around to the driver's side, and they backed out and headed home.

Now he was in the room that had been Juice's hacker room, building furniture that would turn it into a nursery. It had broken her heart to have the Prospects take Juice's gear out to the garage, but she was out of rooms. The guest room got too much traffic to lose.

Happy had invited Leo in to help, and Frank and Nora were building Legos in the living room. When she heard the drill going, though, Nora's attention was very definitely diverted, and she tore down the hallway to the nursery-to-be. Frank was not about to run after her, so by the time she caught up, Nora was already waist deep in bubble wrap and Styrofoam.

Frank stood in the doorway and watched as Happy stopped what he was doing and showed Nora how to pop bubble wrap. He lifted her up and moved her out of the way. She stayed put, gleefully popping bubbles while Happy and Leo organized crib parts.

This was her family now. Happy was here more and more often, and her kids loved having him around. So did she. He filled up part of a space in the house, and in their lives, that shouldn't be empty. She knew he'd be around more after J.J. was here. She knew that he had every intention of being a father to the child who might be his. He'd told her as much. He'd agreed to go along with her decision not to find out, to claim the child as her husband's, but he didn't believe it was true. Everyone knew the kind of relationship he and Frank had, though, so no one questioned his attention and devotion now.

She was glad of it. She was glad that her children had Happy to look after them and to love them, that though they were fatherless, they were not unfathered.

## CHAPTER 31: Hope

Hope screwed up her courage and knocked on the door to her dad's den. He called, "Hold up, midge," and unlocked and answered it in a few seconds. He always kept that door locked, even when he was in there. When she was younger, she'd been obsessively curious about the riddle of that room, but by now, she was used to it.

The door opened, and her dad was standing there with his reading glasses perched on his nose. If not for the wife beater, and the ink on his head, down his arms, and across this chest, he'd look like an accountant. He didn't look anything like an accountant. "What's up?"

"When you have a second, I want to talk to you about something." Her heart was pounding, which was stupid. Even if he lost his shit or got all bossy, she'd be 18 in a month, and . . . he'd still lose his shit and get all bossy. She'd been working up to this conversation for almost a week, though, and she needed to stand up and do it.

He looked concerned. "Problem?"

"No, Daddy. I just have an idea. And I want to talk to you about it."

Now his look was keen interest. "Be right there, midget. Gimme five, and I'll meet you in the living room."

She went to her room to pick something up, and was sitting on the sofa when he came in. He sat down next to her and put his arm across the backrest. "So, what's up?"

"I want to show you something. And I want your totally honest opinion. I'm serious, okay?"

"Okay. I don't lie to you, midge."

"I know, but . . . anyway. I know what I want my first tattoo to be. I drew it, and I want to know—really know—what you think of it. Not just what it means, but if it's good, okay?"

He nodded, and she picked up the file folder she'd brought from her room and pulled a piece of paper from it. She handed it to her dad. "I want it between my shoulder blades."

He gasped. She tried to think if she'd ever heard her dad gasp. She didn't think so. For a long time, he just stared at the drawing. Hope saw that the paper was shaking a little. She knew that what it was would move him, but she really wanted to know if it was good. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"Daddy?"

He looked up at her, his eyes dark and sad. “Jesus, midget. I don’t know what to say.”

“What do you think of it?”

He took a breath. “It’s beautiful. She’d love it. She’d be proud.”

Hope sighed with relief. She had drawn a Medusa, her face slightly more than fist-size, her snakes coiling and slithering in such a way that they’d cross Hope’s shoulder blades. Her mom had had a huge Medusa tattoo that covered a scar on her back. Her mom’s tattoo had stretched from her shoulder blades to her knee, and that was bigger than Hope wanted to go, but she wanted a memorial tattoo, and this one seemed right.

She didn’t see all of her mom’s tattoo all that often, because it was mostly on her back, but she saw it when they shared a dressing room at the mall, or when they changed at Frank’s to swim. When Hope had asked about it, they’d been trying on dresses at Macy’s. So her mom had told her the story of her Medusa with a beautiful, smiling face. They’d sat in there for half an hour, because she had also told her the story of the scar it covered.

Her mom had explained that Medusa was about a woman being strong and insisting on being understood for who she really was. There was a quote that had inspired the tattoo, but Hope couldn’t remember it. It didn’t matter, anyway. The tattoo had been important to her mom, and Hope wanted it for that reason.

She had always been especially interested in how beautiful the face of her mom’s Medusa had been. All the pictures Hope had ever seen of Medusa were of an ugly, obviously evil hag. Her mom had explained that, too, saying that she’s only ugly to those who are too afraid to see her, that Medusa was laughing and beautiful to those who had the courage and took the time to look.

So when Hope drew her Medusa tattoo, she used her favorite photograph of her mom as the model for the face. In that photo, her mom was singing.

“Is it any good? Be straight.”

He huffed. “I wouldn’t be anything but. It’s good. For a drawing, it’s excellent. You got her face perfect. It breaks my heart, it’s so good. Good balance between variety and consistency with the snakes. The dimensions and proportion look right. For a transfer, it’s way over-shaded. But I can work with that. You want me to do it, right?”

She nodded. “I do. But I want you to look at some other stuff, too.” Hope handed him the file folder. “What do you think?”

Her dad studied each drawing in the folder. He said nothing, and Hope sat, on tenterhooks, while he went through the stack.

“I told you you had talent, midget. These are good. You need to work some on your proportions for full bodies, and hands are hard. But this is good stuff. You thinking art school?”

Hope shook her head. She had a different idea. “No, but I have an idea. I need you to listen, okay?” He nodded, slowly, and she continued. “You know that new tattoo shop that opened up across from Level Up, where the weed shop used to be?”

“Yeah. That’s Stacie’s place. I know her. She apprenticed with Toad.” He had a look Hope knew pretty well—he was several steps ahead.

“Yeah—Stacie. I went in there a couple of days ago. They’re looking for a part-time receptionist. And I talked to her about what I’d need to do to learn to tattoo. She said she’d look at my portfolio. But I don’t really have one of those. So I was hoping you could help me with that.”

“I could teach you to tattoo, midge, if that’s what you want to do.”

“No, Daddy. You and I don’t do so well as student and teacher.” Having him teach her to drive would give her twitches behind the wheel for the rest of her driving life. Even when he’d been seemingly calm, she could feel his tension coming off him in waves from the bitch seat. “Plus, if Stacie will apprentice me, I’d get a station at her shop when I was ready. If you think I could do it, would you help me make a portfolio?”

He was quiet, just looking at her. When she thought she’d cry if he didn’t talk, he finally did. “What about your job at Frank’s?”

Feeling anxious that he wasn’t answering her, thinking she was wrong about being able to do this, she swallowed and answered his question, her voice wavering a little. “I can do part-time at both places. Daddy, am I not good enough?”

This time, at least, he didn’t pause before he answered. “You’re more than good enough. You’d be great. I just—I’m trying to get my head around you not wanting me to teach you. That’s my fault—I’m sorry, midge.”

“It’s okay, Daddy. But it’s better if it’s somebody else. I’m glad you know Stacie. Maybe you could come with me and talk to her? Make sure you think she’d be good to teach me?”

He squeezed her knee with his rough hand. “You bet. And I’ll help you with your portfolio, too.”

He helped her put together her drawings and took her that very day to talk to Stacie. By the time they left, Hope had a second job as a receptionist at her shop, and Stacie had agreed to try Hope out as an apprentice once she turned 18.

It felt strange to have an idea what she wanted to do. Strange but good.

-oOo-

A few days later, her dad pulled up to the curb and parked. Hope gripped the handle, ready to open the door, but her dad wasn't moving. He was staring at the steering wheel of the SUV, his fists gripping the leather wrapped around it.

"Daddy?"

Without turning toward her or moving at all, he answered, "Can't do it, midget."

Hope's heart sank. "Daddy, you promised. You promised you'd do it today."

"I know. Can't."

Hope released the handle and sat back, tears blurring her vision of the flowers in her lap. Lilacs, from the big bushes her mother had planted before Hope was even born. They'd gotten their spring blooms a few days ago.

"Please don't make me do it alone. Not today. Please." Her voice was quiet and high, pleading; she'd had to force it out.

But it didn't matter. He still didn't even look at her. "Midge, I'm sorry. I just can't. *She's rotting out there.*"

God, that hurt so much. What he said, what he wouldn't do—it made her feel alone. She wished she'd brought Abel. He'd had come out with her on her mom's birthday and sat with her for a long time. But today she wanted her daddy. He'd never been to her mom's grave.

One year. One year without her mom. Twelve months. 52 weeks. 365 days. She remembered her last breath; it had sounded like a moan.

She fought back the tears making her vision swim and took a breath. "Okay, Daddy. Okay. Wait here." She got out of the truck and walked down the long grass aisle to her mom's grave.

The marker was a double; her dad had bought his plot when he'd bought hers. One side had her name and her dates of birth and death. Above her name was an oval photo of her—the same photo Hope had used as the model for her tattoo. Below her dates, where most markers had something like "Beloved wife and mother," Hope's mom's marker had a single word: "Stay." Her dad had insisted on it, and Hope had almost been witness to a bloodletting when the funeral guy had suggested that it was an unusual choice.

There was a bronze vase in the center of the base. Hope put the lilacs in it and sat down in front of the marker. She felt trampled by loneliness and loss. She really wanted her Daddy to be here with her. But he wasn't.

She thought she should say something, talk to her mom somehow. It seemed silly, though. If her mom could hear her, she didn't need to be at her grave to talk to her. And if she couldn't, then there was no point in saying anything out loud. So she sat there and felt lonely. But she didn't want to go.

She'd stopped thinking so much about how much she missed her mom. She'd had to; it made her head too loud and busy, and she'd felt like she couldn't deal with her life. But sitting at her grave, Hope let herself think. She'd fought a lot with her mom before she'd gotten sick. It seemed for a year or so like that's all they ever did. Or mostly, anyway. It made Hope sad and guilty. She'd wasted precious time being mad about stupid stuff. Abel told her that she'd been lucky, and she had been. She just hadn't realized it until it was too late.

"I miss you, Mommy." The words were out before Hope realized she'd spoken. "I just miss you." Sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of the marker, Hope put her hands in the grass and spread her fingers.

She'd been sitting there awhile when she heard steps coming through the grass. She turned to see her father walking very slowly toward her. She sat still and watched. He stopped about three sites away and stood there, looking stricken. Hope felt sorry for him, but she stayed where she was and waited. She wanted him to come to her.

He turned around and headed back to the truck, and Hope wondered if she'd ever stop feeling abandoned by him. Maybe she was being unfair; maybe she was expecting too much from him. She stood up, preparing to say goodbye to her mom and join her dad at his truck. But he stopped and turned back, and this time he walked up to her and took her hand.

"Sorry, midget." His voice cracked.

"It's okay, Daddy." She squeezed his hand and turned back to her mom's marker. Her dad turned with her, but he was looking out over the cemetery, the muscle in his jaw twitching erratically.

When he finally looked down, he squeezed Hope's hand so hard she thought he was going break it. She tried to deal. Just as she was thinking she'd need to get her hand free, he released it and dropped to a squat. He said one word, her mom's name: "Vivian." It sounded like a prayer or a plea, and Hope's heart hurt. It was as if the loss of her hadn't dulled for him at all. She felt terrible for making him come here today, and for being so mad at him so much of this year—for leaving, for Frank, for Abel, for all of it. She needed to be a better daughter. Her mom had asked her to help him. To forgive him.

Hope bent to put her hand on his shoulder, but then he wrapped his arms around his head. It was such a gesture of private sorrow that she backed off. She blew a kiss toward her mom's photo and walked alone back to the SUV.

From that distance, she watched her dad. He didn't move. She knew he would eventually, though, so she waited. And, eventually, he did. He stood, walked to the marker, put both hands on it, then turned and came back to her.

-oOo-

They didn't talk on the way home. They didn't need to. The quiet was right.

Her dad had pulled into the garage, and they were just getting out of the SUV, when his registered phone rang. He closed the driver's door as he answered. Hope was headed to the door when something in her dad's tone caught her attention.

"Shit. Okay. Now? . . . You okay? . . . Okay. On my way." He ended the call and looked at Hope. "Midget, it's Frank. She says it's time to go to the hospital. I gotta get her. Will you come with me to her house, stay with Leo and Nora?"

Hope felt a surge of anxious adrenaline. This baby would change everything; she knew it. She was terrified. She'd been trying for months and months to learn to be okay with anything that happened, but she didn't always feel like she was having a lot of success. The thought of her dad helping Frank have this baby—who might even be her brother—made her stomach twist. She didn't want her father to have a different family. She just *didn't*.

But then she thought of him curled up into himself at her mom's grave. He'd looked so broken. He'd been disconsolate this whole year. He hadn't forgotten her mom. He said he would never, and now, today, she really believed him. Things were going to change—they had to change—but her mother would not be forgotten.

"Hope?"

She focused. She swallowed and stiffened her spine. "Yeah, okay. Let's go."

-oOo-

When her dad and Frank were gone, on their way to the hospital, Hope set Leo and Nora up with a video and then called Abel. He answered right away, "Hey, beautiful. Just thinkin' about you."

She smiled. He could make her feel good. He was like a professional at it. "Hey. If you're not busy, I need you."

“I’m there in 10, babe. You home?” That was the only question he asked. He was dropping everything for her, and he didn’t even know why she needed him.

“Frank’s. My dad just took her to the hospital. I’m here with the kids.”

“Make it more like 20 then. You think I should tell the guys?”

She had no idea. “I guess my dad will do that. Or he’ll let me know to do it. Probably not our place right now.”

“Fair enough. On my way.”

He was there in less than 20, and the mere sound of his bike pulling up the gravel driveway calmed Hope. She stepped out onto the patio, and as soon as he reached her, he folded her up in his arms. He held her tight, and tension deeper than she was even aware of eased from her body.

Leaning back a bit and looking into her eyes, he said, “You’re tense, babe. Everything okay with the baby?”

“Yeah, yeah. Far as I know. Just . . . I don’t know.” She couldn’t tell him what was really wrong. “Just freaking out a little. Thanks for being with me.”

He brushed her hair back from her face. “I love you, Hope. You need me, I’m here.”

“I love you, too.” She really did. Once she’d stopped trying to understand it and simply let herself feel, it had become obvious to her.

He kissed her. “Man, I’m never gonna get tired of hearing that.” He took her hand, and they went inside.

## CHAPTER 32: Happy

Just outside Frank's birthing room, Happy leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. He'd been shooed out so they could do something to her. He didn't know what. He felt like he should have learned something by now about all this shit, but neither of his daughters had come into the world as they should have. He'd never held a woman's hand while she worked through a contraction before. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. So all he did was let her hold on. She needed to look into his eyes while she did so, and the *déjà vu* broke his heart, but he didn't look away.

Christ, she was in pain. Frank was so goddamn little. She didn't look big enough to have a whole kid inside her. She was stronger than she looked, though. He'd given her his left hand first—that had been a mistake.

Just when she was starting to really struggle, and Hap had to strive to keep his cool, they'd sent him out. He'd resisted, telling the bossiest nurse to fuck herself, but then Frank told him to go ahead and take five. She wanted him to go. So he was out here.

This was the anniversary of Vivian's death. He didn't want this child born today. It was wrong. It felt wrong. But add it to the long list of things in his life he had no control over.

At least things with the club had calmed down. The thought of bringing a kid into the world already with a bodyguard had plagued him during the past months, but Jax, Hap, and Chibs had met with the Mayan leadership a few weeks ago and brokered a truce, bringing them into the IRA deal and supplying them arms for their fight with the other Oakland crews. The waters weren't still, but the sharks had been tamed, at least. Business as usual.

SAMCRO was changing. Juice was dead, Freddy all but, Butch excommunicated, and now Tig gone. And only Jax, Chibs, and Hap were left of what Hap thought of, only in his head, as the true club—the club of his heyday. When the young guns finally took over, probably with Abel at the head, Hap didn't think the Sons would be the same club at all. Maybe that was a good thing. He didn't know anymore. He knew he was tired.

He missed Tig, but he was glad for him. There'd been no question at the table that Tig would be allowed to retire and keep his ink. He even kept his kutte. He was the club's first emeritus member, and they'd sent him off in true SOA style. He'd probably been unconscious for the whole flight the next morning. Now he was living in Paris, and he and Hap were both trying to figure out the video chat thing that Desi and Frank did all the time.

Hope was beginning to take her first real steps away from him. She promised not to leave, and she hadn't, but she was moving away nonetheless. It had torn at him viciously to know that she wanted to tattoo, like him, but didn't want him to teach her. He felt like he'd let her down and missed an important opportunity for them. But he was glad for her to have found something she wanted, something creative that she could make hers,

something with a future, something that kept her in the world she wanted. He only wished she'd felt she could trust him enough to let him share it with her.

But he'd broken that trust. Again and again. The fracture had healed, and he felt they were steady again together. But they were different. She was moving away. Someday, maybe soon, she'd go out on her own, or to Abel, and leave him alone with his ghosts. With one ghost.

But he had Frank, too, and Leo and Nora—and, very soon, J.J. They needed him. He needed them. He could be useful to them. He had a place there, in that family. Not that he'd ever live there. No. He would die in the house his love had died in. But if not for Frank and the kids, it would only be a matter of time before he ate his gun.

Her door open, and Bossy Bertha came out. “Okay, Dad, you can go back in. She's doing much better now.”

Hap stood up away from the wall. “Not Dad. Grandpa.” He pushed past her and went back to Frank.

She was indeed doing much better—relaxed and smiling, which was not at all how he left her.

He kissed her forehead. “You look better, little girl. What'd they give you?”

“Epidural. I'm considering going down on the anesthesiologist.”

He chuckled. “Well, you let me know what you decide, and I'll make sure to give you some privacy with him.”

“Her.”

He grinned. “In that case, I'll stick around.”

Bossy Bertha grabbed Frank's foot and gave it a little shake. “Okay, Frank. You're at six centimeters, so you should get some rest while you can. With a third baby, things could move pretty fast now. Call me if you need me.”

Frank nodded. She turned back to Hap. “If I close my eyes, will you be here when I open them?”

He took her hand, now pliant and relaxed, and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Not going anywhere, little girl. You saw. You're gonna have to throw me out to get rid of me.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. She was asleep in seconds.

-oOo-

There was a doctor between Frank's splayed legs. Hap was working very hard to make sure he stayed up by her head and in no danger of seeing what the fuck was going on down there. She'd been pushing for more than an hour. Everyone seemed surprised at that. Apparently it should have gone faster. The vibe in the room had changed suddenly, and Hap's insides went sour. Something was wrong.

Frank was exhausted, drenched in sweat. After every push, she completely collapsed. Hap wanted somebody to fucking *do* something, but he was lost. He didn't even know whom he'd kill first if something happened. No—he knew. The doctor. He fucking *hated* doctors.

The doctor—a thin, youngish man with glasses—looked up and got Frank's attention. "Okay, Frank. We knew you have a big boy here. It's time to get him into the world. His shoulders are stuck, hon. I need you not to push. Do not push, until I say otherwise, okay? I'm going to have to go up there and help him. I need you to breathe through it, okay? You have to stay relaxed."

Frank nodded, never opening her eyes. In a few seconds, though, they started doing whatever they were doing between her legs, and her eyes flew open. "Oh—that hurts. The epidural's not working. That hurts. God! That fucking hurts!"

"I know, hon. It's wearing off, but I can't give you more. You're gonna have to tough it out. Stay relaxed, though. Breathe. You need to relax for me, Frank."

There was something in the doctor's tone that just about sent Hap into a panic. Operating on instinct, he squeezed Frank's hand and grabbed her face, forcing her to look at him. "C'mon, little girl. Look at me. Stay on me. Deep breaths. Put your pain into my hand. Stay on me." She did, squeezing his hand until it shook, her eyes pained and frantic, but on him. And then she relaxed, as if relieved—in fact, the whole room seemed to.

"Okay, one more little push . . . good." Frank fell back onto the pillows, gasping, her eyes closed.

The room was quiet, the doctor and nurses, speaking, but in low voices, like they didn't want Frank to hear. The baby was there; Hap could see him, but no one was telling Frank or doing any kind of celebrating. Hap saw a nurse take a bundle to the incubator thing, but the baby was quiet.

"Happy?" Frank's voice was weak, exhausted. "What's going on? Where is he?"

"Don't know, little girl. I'll find out." He kissed her hand and walked to the nurse at the incubator.

The baby wasn't breathing. The nurse had a tiny mask on his face, pushing air to him, but he lay there, grey and still. Hap's world filled with white noise. Sweet Christ, no. No.

NO. His hands curled into fists thinking about having to go back to Frank and tell her this.

And then small, chubby legs kicked. The nurse pulled the respirator away, and a thin wail filled the room. It gained volume and power, and then he took a huge breath and just bellowed, his skin pinking before Hap's eyes.

Hap fell back against the wall, taking his own deep breaths.

The nurse looked up from the baby. "You want to cut the cord, Dad?"

He shook his head. "Not Dad. Grandpa."

She smiled. "Sorry. You want to cut the cord, Grandpa?"

Hap almost said no. But then he nodded and went to the incubator. The baby—J.J.—was already wearing a little blue and white hat. He'd need an SOA hat. His face was scrunched tight, as were his fists. He looked pissed. Hap understood. He took the scissors the nurse handed him and cut through the umbilical cord. He hadn't had a chance to do such a thing for Hope or Katherine. It was simply a ritual, of course; the doctor had cut it when it was still attached to Frank. The cord, the thing which had been inside Frank, giving nourishment to her child, was dense and thick, much harder than Hap had expected.

The nurse cut it again, much closer to J.J.'s belly. Then she swaddled him and handed him to Hap. "Why don't you take him over to Mom?"

As soon as he'd been freed from the light of the incubator, J.J.'s face relaxed, and his eyes opened a little. He still looked pissed, and Hap still understood. He was a fat little fucker; no wonder he'd given his scrawny mother such a hard time. Hap bent down and kissed his soft new cheek.

He glanced up at the clock over the bed. It was almost 1am. The next day.

Hap walked him back to Frank, who was still being worked on. Bossy Bertha was standing at the bed, too, and when Hap handed the baby to Frank, she helped her open her gown and expose her breasts. They were much fuller than usual, and she'd taken her jewelry out. Hap turned away, thinking of Vivian nursing Hope, and what that had done to him.

"I'm gonna get a smoke, little girl. I'll be back."

"Happy—wait. You're not leaving?"

He turned back to see J.J. latching on. Frank gasped and looked down. Hap felt every conceivable emotion. He was going to collapse under the onslaught. “Just a smoke. Back in five.”

-oOo-

When he came back, he felt more in control of himself. J.J. was sleeping on his mother’s slight chest, and Frank was alone, at last, in the room. Her eyes were closed when he came in, but they opened, and she smiled to see him. He went to her and brushed her still-wet hair back to kiss her forehead.

“You did good, little girl.”

“Couldn’t have gotten through it without you. Thank you. I love you, Happy.”

“Love you.” He nodded at the boy. “It’s J.J., right? Juicy Junior goin’ on his birth certificate?”

She laughed softly, careful not to disturb her son. “Not quite. I want to name him after his dad, but Juice didn’t like his name. So this is John Charles Ortiz. But yeah—he’s J.J.”

Hap put his hand on J.J.’s head. This was his son. And he was Juice’s son, too. He and Frank had made a family of ghosts. “It’s a good name.” He looked at Frank. “You think we’re gonna be okay?”

Frank nodded. “I do, Happy. We can do this.”

Hap rested his forehead on hers. “Okay. We will.”

THE END