

**MAKE ME RIGHT**  
*A Sons of Anarchy Story*  
By Susan Fanetti/laughingwarrior

**CHAPTER 1:**

“Punk Rock Girl,” The Dead Milkmen

Juice locked the front door to Clear Passages, the colonic and weed shop he'd recently become part-owner of. He didn't know much about owning a business, but his partners were teaching him the ropes. They'd invited him to invest because he had good contacts and could drive revenue. That worked fine for him. After fourteen months inside, he liked having something legitimate, maybe even a little respectable, to do. Doing real time, even short time, had shaken him up pretty good.

As he came up on his Dyna, he looked up and down at the other businesses on Crestview Avenue. He hadn't taken much time to notice the surroundings yet. The street had actually changed pretty much since he'd been away. A year or so ago, it had been mostly closed up, with a few lazy storefronts still open. But now there were several new shops, and it had taken on kind of a funky vibe. It reminded Juice a little of the Village—well, the Charming version of the Village, anyway. The weed shop fit right in.

Scanning the storefronts, his eyes lit on a new shop across the street: Level Up Games and Comics. *Ho-ly shit. Holy shit! Charming got a comic book store?* The neon “Open” sign glowed in the window, so Juice strode across the street, a huge smile on his face.

A little bell jingled over the door as he went in. He was blasted with the distinctive aroma that only comic book stores—and seemingly all comic book stores—had: a mixture of pulp paper, ink, and, well, geek. To Juice, it smelled like home. The Sons gave him endless shit for his geeky interests, even though those interests made him a badass hacker, and he'd learned to keep them mostly to himself. He bought comics and video games like married men bought porn: online and on the down low.

But now, right here, right across the street from his shop: heaven! He rubbed his hand over his freshly-groomed mohawk and looked around. Comics to the right, games to the left. Tall register desk in the middle. And a gaming area behind that. From somewhere to his left, he heard a female voice: “Hi. Come on in. You need any help?”

He located the front desk, but there wasn't anyone there, so he cast his voice in the general direction he'd heard hers. “Hey. I'm just gonna look around—first time in here. How long you been open?”

The voice came closer. “Almost six months.” Around the end of a tall display of gaming gear came the owner of the voice, and Juice's excitement about the comics moved to the background as he took her in. She was little. Slender. Slim hips. Small tits, but nice. The bottom three inches or so of her head was shaved, and the hair that was left was long, bright pink, and pulled into a ponytail.

She wore black horn-rimmed glasses. Her left eyebrow had three small silver rings through it. She had another small silver ring through her left nostril, and maybe ten piercings, all silver studs or rings, in each ear. She wore silver rings on both middle fingers and both thumbs. She wore a studded leather choker—not quite a dog collar, but close.

Her makeup was heavy and dark, especially around her eyes. And her eyes were unbelievable—brilliant, vivid, icy blue, magnified a little behind the glasses, their eerie color intensified by the dark liner surrounding them.

She was wearing a short denim jacket over a torn, red vintage Ramones t-shirt, a tight, really short black skirt, black-and-red striped tights, and shiny, bright blue combat boots. Her legs were amazing, slender and shapely. Not too skinny. Really nice.

*She* would most definitely fit in in the Village. Fuck, she looked like she was on her way to CBGB, planning to party backstage with Iggy. Juice hadn't seen a girl look like this since he left Queens. Sure, Crow Eaters were made up and pierced and inked, but they had a whole different vibe—more pole dancer than hipster. Goth girls and punk girls had been his weakness, and this sweet little thing had all that going on.

It only took a second or two for Juice to get his look and process it, so she was still smiling a customer-service kind of smile at him, apparently unaware that he'd been ogling her hard. But now Juice had a huge boner, so he turned to his right and headed into the stacks, away from her. As he walked, very much not wanting to be rude, he said, "Six months, huh? We just opened the weed shop across the way last week. Can I ask how business is going?"

It was the wrong thing to ask if he wanted some distance from her, because she immediately walked his way. She came into the aisle he was in. "You own Clear Passages?"

He walked to the opposite end of the stack, blocking his crotch from her view and silently berating his rigid rod. "Yep. Well, part owner, anyway. You thinking about stopping by?"

She snorted. "Uh, nope. Not for any passage-clearing, anyway. Gross. And I still get my weed the old fashioned way."

Her smile changed from retail to real as she talked, and Juice was dazzled. He said, "You didn't answer my question."

"About business? You asked if you could ask. What if I say no?"

"I guess that wouldn't be very neighborly of you." He smiled his best flirtation smile—he didn't want to pull out the seduction smile yet. Just flirting right now. This girl might be worth investing a little time.

She laughed hard. Juice caught a glint of metal in her tongue—*fuck me!*—as her head tipped back. “Fuck, dude. Put those pearlies away. I’m not going to drop my dainties because you smiled pretty at me. Geez, the girls you fuck must be really stupid.”

That caught Juice off guard. The smile always worked—and he’d done just fine even before he wore a patch. But, yeah, mostly anymore he fucked Crow Eaters, and, yeah, a lot of them were pretty stupid. The kutte was all they needed to spread their legs for him—him or any of his brothers.

She took pity on him. “To answer your question, business is fine. We have low expectations, though. Comic books and games aren’t exactly the ticket to Easy Street, ya know? This is a labor of love.”

“You the owner?” She seemed awfully young to be the owner, but she was talking like someone in the know.

“Yeah. With my big brother. We are the owners and only employees. I’m Frank, by the way.” She held out her hand.

Juice had gotten control of his cock and had moved back into the aisle with her. He took her hand—it was small but remarkably strong, with short, blunt, dark crimson nails—and shook, asking, “Frank?”

“Well, it’s Frances on my birth certificate, but I’ll cut a bitch calls me Frances. So, yeah. Frank. And you are . . .”

He grinned sheepishly. “Oh, sorry. Juice.”

“Juice. And you want to give me shit for Frank?” Smiling, she gave his hand another shake and then dropped it.

He laughed. “Well, on my birth certificate it says Juan Carlos, but yeah. Don’t call me that.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Juice. Did you want to look around, or were you just in here trying to get laid?”

*Jesus*, she was blunt. He didn’t know what to make of this girl, but she was right. He totally wanted to bone her. Totally. But maybe more than that. He was having a great time *talking* to her. She was interesting as fuck, and she had a real sense of humor. He smiled and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just in here for some reading material.”

Frank grinned. “Well, have at it. What’s your poison?”

“I’ll read pretty much anything”—he saw her eyes start to roll—“but the runs I’m reading hot off the press right now are *Uncanny X-Force*, *Hellblazer*, and *Hellboy*.” There. That got him some cred.

She nodded. “Tomorrow is release day, at least for *X-Force* and *Hellblazer*, so you should come back then for the new issues.”

“Good point. I’ll do that. I just came in to look around, really. I’m glad to see we finally got a shop like this in Charming. Maybe I’ll check out your games.”

“They’re over here.” She started walking back to the left side of the shop. “I was filling in inventory when you came in.” The bell over the door jingled. She gestured toward the shelves along the side wall and said, “be my guest,” and headed over to greet the new customer.

When she turned, he saw that the ends of her ponytail were tipped in black, and she had a tattoo on the back of her shaved scalp—a few lines of binary code, *Matrix* style. He could read binary. He wanted to get a closer look to see what it said. But right now, he needed to turn and face the wall of games, have another stern talk with his cock. It was trying really hard to embarrass him tonight.

He aimlessly perused the Xbox games, not really paying attention, thinking about Frank more than anything. He was interested, definitely. Didn’t seem like she was, though. He wasn’t used to women being immune to his charms. He’d have to think about that some more, come up with a plan. Because this was a challenge he was up for. His cock sure was, obviously.

He heard the cash register working, and then Frank telling someone to have a good night. Then she was walking back toward him.

“Hey, Juice? Technically, we closed five minutes ago, and I’d like to close out the register and get home, so maybe you could come back tomorrow for the new issues?”

He was surprised how disappointed he was, but okay. He knew where to find her. He’d see her tomorrow. He needed to make a plan, anyway. “Oh, yeah. Sorry ‘bout that. I’ll just see you tomorrow then.”

She smiled and walked him to the door. As he stepped over the threshold, she said, “Well, I’m off tomorrow, but my brother will be here. Garrett. He’s cool. You’ll like him. Bye, Juice. Have a good night!” Frank closed the door, turned the lock, and pulled a shade down, blocking his view of her.

Juice stood staring at the locked door, dazed and confused.

## CHAPTER 2:

### “Someday,” The Strokes

Frank parked her yellow 1976 Gremlin on the street and walked back to her apartment. It drove Garrett crazy that she wouldn't live at home with him, but she liked her private space. Anyway, living in her childhood bedroom felt pretty lame, even though their parents were dead and she and Garrett owned the house now. Now it would feel both creepy *and* lame. Garrett had moved into their parents' bedroom. As far as she was concerned, that was its own brand of creepy, but to each his own.

She had a little studio apartment above the garage of a house in the same neighborhood, one of the nicer ones in Charming. Charming didn't really have *nice* neighborhoods, unless you were an Oswald or a Hale, but it was quiet here, and people took care of their shit. An elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Benderson, were her landlords. They were nice, they weren't too freaked out by the way she looked, and they didn't mind that she got paint on the floor of the apartment. She helped them out, running errands and mowing the lawn, and they kept her rent down. They even let her have a cat. Perfect arrangement for her.

She climbed the steps along the side of the garage and unlocked her door. Smeagol, her obese, obnoxious, ginger cat, started yelling as soon as she slid her key into the lock. “Alright, buddy, geez. Hold on.” She got in and dropped her canvas bag near the door. Smeagol tried to leap into her arms, but he'd gotten way too fat for liftoff, so she bent down and grabbed him. He purred loudly and started yelling again as she walked to the little kitchenette. The cat was clearly a good long way from starving, but he could barely contain himself when he knew food was in the offing.

She fed him, grabbed a beer for herself, and plopped down on her futon. The day had been interesting. They'd done pretty well, receipts-wise, for an off day, and she'd finally gotten the shop organized and looking the way she wanted it. Garrett didn't much care about what went where, but Frank really did.

Then, right at closing, the cute guy had come in. Juice. Mohawk, great scalp ink, nice looking. Maybe not the brightest bulb, but nice. And clearly used to all the girls dropping right to their knees before him. She'd enjoyed giving him shit.

She'd seen him around before; the mohawk was distinctive. But not for a while, maybe. She would have sworn he was a Son, but he was wearing a plain black hoodie tonight, and Sons *never* went around Charming without their kutties. Maybe she was wrong—or maybe he was just a hang-around or something. She'd heard him take off on his bike, which was obviously a Harley, so there seemed to be some kind of connection with SAMCRO.

Anyway, cute. She didn't think she was really interested, though. She wanted something more than just another Charming doofus. And if he was affiliated with the Sons, that wasn't exactly a turn-on for her—they seemed like an arrogant bunch of assholes, best case, and were into some pretty bad shit, any case. But he'd been a nice diversion to end the night. He was obviously

interested, and she'd felt damn good about herself, leaving him standing open-mouthed outside the shop and locking the door between them.

She kinda wished she were going into the shop tomorrow, but she had class, and there was no way she was missing Life Drawing. Andre was such an asshole to people who missed class. He obviously believed in the boot camp approach to education, cut the wheat from the chaff or whatever. He delighted in embarrassing people he thought weren't good or serious enough. Frank had taken it as a personal mission to avoid the sting of his sharp tongue.

She finished her beer and put the empty in the recycling bin next to the counter. Then she walked to the back of the room. Here's why she loved this apartment so much—it was an actual studio. The back wall, facing the Bendersons' yard and the woods behind it, was almost entirely glass. She had a big easel positioned right in the center of that glass wall, and the light could not be better.

Her work was more abstract than landscapey, but still the view and the light was inspiring. Sometimes she'd just sit and look at her easel, against this background of green and gleam, and feel content. It made her feel like an artist, even though she'd never sold anything or even shown anything except in school shows. She would. Someday.

But now she busied herself with putting her paints away in their box. She'd left in a hurry this morning and had barely taken the time to recap them. She didn't mind clutter, but she hated mess. She stopped and examined the piece on the easel. It still hadn't turned into anything. It had veered far away from the image she'd started with almost as soon as her brush hit the canvas, and now she wasn't sure where it was going. Her style was to let the painting tell her what it wanted to be. She didn't think either of them knew what that was yet. She'd follow it out, though. Giving up wasn't her style. Neither was starting over. Always forward, that was her play. Never look back.

She finished cleaning up, went over and microwaved herself some ramen, got another beer, and watched an episode of *Battlestar Galactica* while she ate. Then she turned on the Xbox for some *Assassin's Creed*. A few hours later, she opened the futon and turned in for the night, Smeagol taking his customary spot on her pillow next to her head, leaving her what felt like about two inches in the corner.

She went to sleep thinking about mohawks and scalp tats and bright, sexy smiles.

### CHAPTER 3:

“Hey,” The Pixies

Juice rode down Crestview and pulled up in front of Clear Passages. He looked across the street as he took his helmet off. He wondered if Frank was working today.

He'd been by the shop four times in the past ten days trying to see her again, but each time, she was either not there or she was busy in the back and couldn't be disturbed. It was like she was trying to mess with him. She'd said she and her brother were the only employees—how could he keep missing her?

Her brother was an okay guy. Tall, skinny, glasses, looked like a typical geek. He knew his shit, and Juice had spent a lot of time in there talking comics with Garrett, hoping to see Frank. She was so elusive, he was inadvertently making a friend in her brother.

He stood on the sidewalk trying to decide whether to run across the street and see if Frank was working. He was determined to get to know that girl. With everything else going on in his life right now, he wanted one normal thing to happen. Getting to know Frank was that thing.

But he was also starting to feel like an asshole—either because he was becoming a stalker or because he was letting her dick him around. So he stood there, trying to make up his mind—go into the weed shop, or cross the street and see if Frank was around.

He crossed the street.

The bell chimed as he opened the door, and she was right there. Well, the ladder she was standing on was right there. She was above him, one foot on the topmost perch of the tall—eight feet at least—ladder, the other foot flat against the wall as she leaned into that leg and hammered something into the wall. She was wearing a black tank top, exposing her arms and at least some of her ink—an intricate black-and-grey upper sleeve on her left arm and shoulder. He could see ink across the back of her shoulders, too. All of it seemed to comprise a complicated pattern more than any particular image. He'd need to take a close look. She had on red Converse All-Stars, and her jeans were punk-tattered and skinny. He had a great view of her ass. She was little and thin, but her ass filled out her jeans just right. Mmm.

Without looking away from her task, she said, “Hi. Sorry to be in the way. I'll be down in the minute.”

“Hi, Frank. No problem—but be careful, okay?” He took hold of the ladder, keeping it steady.

She looked down quickly at the sound of his voice, and the ladder wobbled despite his grip on it. She tipped back just slightly, and for a second Juice thought she was going to fall off the ladder into his arms, but she caught herself and corrected, leaning into the wall. She was pretty agile.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” she snapped. Dammit. He finally saw her again, and it was not going as he’d hoped. He kept hold of the ladder, though. She was going to break her damn neck. She stretched dangerously to reach over to the top of a display case and grabbed the end of the sale banner she was stringing. She fastened it to the hook she’d just hammered in. Then she was done, and she came down the ladder to stand next to him. Her ponytail was dyed entirely black now.

“Hi, Juice. You need something?”

He saw that her top had an “N7” logo printed across her firm breasts. “You a *Mass Effect* fan?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Of course. Can I help you find something?”

He didn’t know what her deal was. He thought they’d had a good talk when they met, but she was acting like he’d done something to piss her off. He didn’t know what, though. He figured what the hell, and he asked. “Did I do something to piss you off, Frank?”

For a second, she just looked at him over the rims of her glasses. Then she said, “No. But look, Juice. I know you’ve been coming around asking for me, and I don’t know what you want. We talked for like ten minutes once, and now you’re kinda being a stalker. If I were interested, you’d have seen me again before now.”

That derailed him hard. He was *sure* their exchange when they met had been flirty. He pretty much figured her locking him out and avoiding him was a hard-to-get thing. Girls he liked liked him back. That’s how it worked. He wasn’t necessarily dissuaded, but he needed to recalculate. First, though, it sounded like he needed to apologize.

“Man, I’m sorry, Frank. I didn’t mean to freak you out. I just liked meeting you and thought you’d be cool to get to know. As a friend. That’s all.” Okay, that was a big fat lie, but if friends was an in, friends it would be.

She gave him a long, appraising look. “Okay, then. That’s fine. I liked meeting you, too, and I’m cool with getting to know a new friend. But to be really clear: I’m not interested in anything else. Understood?”

Juice grinned. “Pretty full of yourself to just assume I wanted more than that, aren’t ya?”

She just snorted and folded up the ladder. He took it from her. “I got this. Where do you want it?”

“Come with me, doofus. I’ll take you backstage.” She led him past the front desk, through the gaming area, to the open door to the back room. It looked the way most retail back rooms probably looked: stacks of boxes, a desk piled with papers, a cheap Formica table and some plastic chairs, a beat-up old couch. But the couch was facing two flat screen TVs hung on the wall, and arrayed on a long, low table below them was just about every gaming console Juice could name, most in duplicate.

Frank indicated a blank space on the wall by the door, and he leaned the ladder there. He turned around and gestured at the TV. “You guys play back here?”

“Yeah. We play the new releases before we put them out, or we’ll mess around waiting for the other to get done closing up or whatever. Plus, this is pretty much the only place Garrett and I see each other, so when we play together, we do it here. We have it set up so we can play online while we’re sitting on the couch together. It gets a little chaotic, but it’s fun.”

Just then the back door opened and Garrett walked in. He was as tall as his sister was small—well over six feet—but weighed probably a buck-fifty. He had shaggy, dirty blond hair and wore John Lennon glasses. Juice thought he kinda looked like Lennon, actually. “Hey, sissy. Oh—hi Juice. I see you finally nailed her.”

Frank’s jaw dropped, and then she snapped it shut and looked daggers at her brother. “What the fuck, Garry?”

“What? Oh! Oh, no!” Garrett stammered. “That’s not what I meant! I just meant—fuck.”

Juice guffawed. Garrett was beet red, and Frank looked fit to spit. “Just shut your stupid mouth, Garrett. Shit.”

Garrett smiled awkwardly. “Sorry. I’m just going to go out on the floor. You hanging around long?”

Frank sighed and shrugged, already over it. “Not sure. I have some stuff to get done for tomorrow, and it’s been dead slow out there, but I don’t know.” She looked at Juice. “You wanna co-op some *Halo Reach* or something?”

That sounded like a promising start to Juice’s new plan. He pulled his cell out of his pocket and checked it. No messages. Things were uncharacteristically quiet with the club. “Sounds cool. Let’s do it.” He took off his hoodie.

He didn’t think about the kutte underneath. He saw Frank take it in, contemplating. “You’re a Son, huh?” She didn’t sound impressed. More like the opposite. Obviously, she wasn’t going to get swoony over his leather.

He got defensive right away but tried to keep it in check. “Yeah. That a problem for you?”

She looked him in the eye for a beat before she answered. “No. I thought you might be. To each his own. Why are you hiding it, though?”

Juice shrugged. It definitely didn’t seem like the time to tell her he’d just gotten out of prison. “Long story. Nothing to do with you.”

“Fair enough.” She handed him a controller and sat on one end of the couch. Juice nodded and sat on the other.

They played for three hours. Frank was really good and *really* competitive. She sat on the edge of the couch, and she reacted with her whole body as she worked the controller. She kept track of the kill count and got really intense when Juice's kills were up. It was barely like they were on the same side. She had a filthy mouth, too, and took the trash talk as well as she dealt it.

In short, she was hot as hell.

He also had the chance to read her binary tattoo. It said, "Badass Gamer Girl." Oh yeah.

But as they completed their fourth mission, she paused the game and said, "Okay, I need to pull the plug and get out of here. I have a lot to do still tonight to get ready for school tomorrow."

Juice was suddenly worried. She was so small she looked about fourteen, but he'd assumed she was grown because she owned a business. Plus the ink and piercings. Bringing up school, though, made him nervous. He handed her his controller and asked, "What school?"

"State." Okay, good. Young, but not jailbait.

Juice had taken a course at CUNY once, but school was not his deal. Still he knew enough to ask, "What's your major?"

"Art. I'm a senior."

"That's really cool! What kind of art?"

"Painting, mainly, though we have to take courses in pretty much everything. But I like to work in oils or acrylics. You know anything about art?"

"Other than tattoos, not really. But I still think it's cool. I'm not creative like that at all." He paused, looked at her. "I'd like to see some of your work sometime."

She regarded him for a moment. "Maybe. Sometime." She turned off the console and TV and stood up. "Anyway, I do need to get out of here. You can go up front and hang with Garrett if you're not ready to go. He likes you, too, and it's probably lonely as hell out there today."

Juice was thinking about how much he liked hearing her say "He likes you, *too*," so he didn't say anything right away. Frank leaned into the shop. "I'm outie, Garry."

He heard Garrett's muted voice, "Okay, sissy. See you later. Oh, hey—can you take those boxes to the post office on your way to school tomorrow?"

Frank sighed. "Yeah, okay. See ya."

She slung her canvas bag across her chest and walked over to a stack of three decent-size boxes next to the desk. She tried to pick the whole stack up. They apparently weren't heavy, but the

stack was higher than her head once she had them in her arms, and she was struggling. Coming to her rescue for the second time, Juice walked up and took the top two boxes off her stack. “Where we taking them?”

She looked like she was going to protest his help, but then she thought better of it and smiled. “Thanks. Just out to my car, It’s here in the back.” She led him out the back door.

When he saw her Gremlin, he laughed. “What the hell is *that*?”

She kicked him. “That’s my car, dickhead. You be nice. I love him.”

“Him?” He couldn’t stop laughing.

“Yeah, him. That’s Elwood. And I said be nice.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to hurt *Elwood*’s feelings.” He ducked as she swatted at him. She had the hatch up and he put the boxes in the back of her “car.” Such as it was. She closed the hatch.

“Okay, thanks. I had fun, Juice. Being friends with you might not be so bad after all.”

He grinned. It was a start, anyway. But just a start. “Yeah, I had a good time. I’ll see ya, Frank.”

She got in her car. It started right up and sounded pretty good, surprisingly. She waved back at him and drove away.

Juice stood in the little lot for a couple of minutes. Yep. He was a goner.

## CHAPTER 4:

### “Art School,” The Jam

Frank was raking leaves from the Bendersons’ yard. Even in California, autumn meant leaves to rake. The Bendersons had a corner lot, a manual push mower, several big trees, and a small rake, so Frank got plenty of exercise taking care of their yard.

When she heard the Harley, she stopped and turned quickly toward the sound, a little thrill of adrenaline picking up her heart rate. It wasn’t Juice—but it was another Son, riding down the side street with a woman behind him. Frank stopped and watched them go. Then the bike slowed and turned into a nearby driveway. Curious, she walked closer to the street to see where the bike had stopped. Huh. Dr. Accardo’s house.

She watched as the riders got off the bike. When they took off their helmets, Frank was surprised and impressed to see that Dr. Accardo herself was the passenger. The biker she was with was huge. Full beard, long hair, the complete mountain man package. Not Frank’s cuppa, but impressive looking nonetheless. He leaned down and kissed her—not a peck, either; definitely R-rated, or at least a hard PG-13—and Frank chuckled. Well, what do you know?

She wasn’t exactly friends with Dr. Accardo. She didn’t even know her first name. They’d first met when Frank had taken a Renaissance History course at State. That was before she’d moved in over the Bendersons’ garage. Since then, she’d seen her around the neighborhood—she ran a lot—and Frank had been touched and impressed that the professor had remembered her by name, even two years later. She guessed it paid not to look like everyone else.

Frank sure remembered Dr. Accardo—she was still one of her favorite professors in almost four years of college, even though she’d only taken that one class with her. She was way cool and made crusty old ancient history fun. Frank supposed if any professor was likely to be a biker’s old lady, it was Dr. Accardo.

Seeing her history professor so intimate with a Son gave her something to think about, actually—as did the thrill she’d felt at the sound of a Harley. Juice hadn’t even ever been to her apartment, so there was no reason to have thought or hoped it would be him. He didn’t even know where she lived. But they’d been hanging out quite a bit over the past couple of months, and Frank had to admit that she was starting to really like him a lot. Too much. He was a lot smarter than she’d at first thought, and he was great with just about anything electronic. They shared a lot of interests. He had a good sense of humor. He was really sweet and could be adorably goofy. He was totally nice to look at. He was older, but not like creepy older. On paper, they made a great match.

But she still didn’t want to start something with him. The Sons thing freaked her out. It was just too hardcore for her. Juice himself wasn’t, though. He didn’t seem much at all like she’d expect a biker to be, no matter how badass he looked. But just in the couple of months she’d known him, some seriously bad shit had gone down, four dead guys found at the Charming Heights site not least. Everyone in town was saying the Sons had killed those guys. Is that what Juice was off

doing when he wasn't hanging around at Level Up with her? She was all about being a rebel, but she didn't think she could deal with shit like that.

But if Dr. Accardo was involved with a Son, maybe it wasn't as scary as she thought. Something to think about, anyway. Later. She shook off her thoughts and got back to raking. She had to get a move on.

Probably the biggest game title of the year was being released at midnight, and they were having a big release party at the shop tonight, from 11pm to 2am. She needed to get this yard work done, get cleaned up, and get to the shop to help Garrett get ready. Juice had offered to help, too. They needed a big night, and they'd invested a lot in advertising this party and getting it set up. Sales had been slow, and even though they had a pretty good cushion from the money their parents had left them, things needed to pick up to make the business work.

OOO

It was coming up on 4am, and Garrett was finally closing out the register. The party had been huge. They'd sold out of all versions of the new game, and sold a bunch of other stuff. The place had been packed. Frank didn't know where all the people had come from, but they'd done a lot of shopping while they were here. Juice was still there, now helping her put the stacks to rights and generally clean up while Garrett counted receipts. They still had the stereo blaring, and they were both bopping around the shop like idiots, currently to The Jam. Juice had some decent moves. Garrett was bouncing in place at the register, a big grin on his face. Frank felt fantastic and really amped. The three energy drinks might have had something to do with that.

“Holy shit, sissy! Holy shit! Get over here!”

Both she and Juice danced over behind the counter, Juice playing a mad punk air guitar on the way. “What's up, Garry?” Garrett showed her the tape. “That can't be right. Can that be right?”

“Ran it twice. It's right. \$22K in receipts. In four hours. In the middle of the night.”

“Fuck, Garry, that's like our *whole month!*”

“More, even!” They hugged, and Garrett swung her around.

When he put her down she turned toward Juice and put both hands up for a high ten. They grabbed hands and brought them down in a wide arc. They did a chest bump; Frank had to jump to reach Juice's chest. She yelled, “WOO-HOO!” Juice put his hands around her waist and lifted her up, and she laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck.

They'd never been this close before. Frank could feel the hard muscles of his chest and abdomen pressed against her body. And then she could feel something else against her legs. He just held her, his dark eyes suddenly intense and serious. He set her down, sliding her along his body until her feet reached the floor. She knew she should pull away, but her body didn't seem to want to

listen to her brain. All she could do was stand there with her hands on his shoulders, staring into his eyes and waiting. For something.

He took her glasses off with one hand and set them on the counter. Her brain tapped her on the shoulder and cleared its throat, but she didn't object. He put his hand on the back of her head, holding her firmly still as he bent down and came in for a kiss. Her brain shrugged and gave up, and she leaned toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He pressed soft, full lips to hers, and he held there, not trying to chew up her face, just lips pressed to lips. It was sweet and sexy, and not at all what Frank would have expected. She relaxed against him, and then he moved his mouth, tracing her lips with his tongue.

Frank moaned and opened her mouth before she could stop herself, and Juice took advantage of the opportunity to push his tongue in. Still the kiss was reserved, his tongue moving gently, running back and forth over the stud in her tongue. He groaned and pulled her even closer.

He was a great kisser. She was so damn turned on. There was a heavy, steady pulse between her legs. And her brother was standing like three feet behind her.

That's when Frank's brain jumped back in. Her hands moved back to his shoulders and she pushed herself away, out of his embrace. She cleared her throat and put the back of her hand to her mouth. "Okay, no. No, Juice."

She watched his expression cycle from focused to confused, to disappointed, and finally to frustrated. He reached for her, but she took another step back. "Frank, come on. Why not?"

With some distance between them, Frank had better control of her baser instincts. She was right to stop him. She turned to look behind her, but Garrett wasn't there. He must have had a rare moment of discretion and made himself scarce during the impromptu make-out session. She turned back to Juice. "Just friends, Juice. That's all I want."

"But why? The way you just kissed me, I know you feel more than friendly." He leaned against the counter, his arms crossed.

She didn't want to get specific if she could avoid it. "Doesn't matter. I really like you, Juice. I think we've had a good thing hanging out these past couple of months. But I don't want more with you.

"There's gotta be a reason!" His feelings were obviously hurt. If she told him the truth, his feelings would probably be a lot more hurt. But lying seemed like a bad idea—not to mention totally lame.

"Okay. You want a reason? You're a Son. I can't deal with that. That's way too much drama for me."

Uh, yep. Really hurt his feelings. Now he was pissed, she could tell. "If you think my club is so bad, why is it okay to be friends, then? I am who I am, Frank. And, yeah, I'm a Son. Through

and through.” He stopped and stared hard at her for a second. “You know why I wear a hoodie over my kutte? Because I’m on parole, and I can’t wear it in public. I just did fourteen months with my brothers. On a federal weapons charge. You sure you wanna be *friends* with a lowlife like me?”

She’d already pretty much deduced as much. “That’s not why I have a problem with you being a Son. I don’t care about that, and I don’t think you’re a lowlife. I really do like you, that’s why I want to be friends. I think you’re a great guy. My life is more fun with you in it. I don’t care that you’ve *been in* prison. I care that you could *go to* prison. Or worse. I don’t want to be in love with someone when I never know if he’ll come home. If we started something, I’d fall in love with you. That’s just how I am. I don’t do casual. I don’t have anything against it, I just can’t do it. I’m not wired like that. Better to just stay off that road entirely.”

“I think that’s chickenshit.”

“Yeah, well, you can just bite me.” Probably not the best comeback, but she was pissed and freaked out and bummed, and she just wanted this stupid conversation to be over.

They stared each other for a long moment, and then Juice pushed off the counter and walked past her to the back room. He came back out with his kutte on, shrugging the big black hoodie over his shoulders. He walked through the shop and out the front door without saying another word.

*Fuck!* Frank kicked a life-size cardboard Master Chief in the armored nuts.

## CHAPTER 5:

“Story of My Life,” Social Distortion

“Ever Fallen in Love (with Someone You Shouldn’t’ve)?,” The Buzzcocks

Juice was sitting astride his Dyna, parked outside Clear Passages, waiting for Chibs. He’d finally convinced one of his brothers to try out a colonic at his shop. It had taken serious gastrointestinal distress, but Chibs was on his way to his first green tea and mint cleanse.

Juice looked across the street. He hadn’t been to Level Up in more than two weeks, not since the night of the release party. Frank had left several messages for him on his registered cell, but he’d just deleted them without even listening. If she wasn’t okay with the Sons, it was a non-starter, and he was going to have to deal. No way around it. Hanging around her pretending that he was satisfied being her friend was not the way to deal.

But all he could think about was that kiss. Even when he was getting sucked off by some Crow Eater—which he’d been seeking out a lot these past couple of weeks—all he could think about was Frank and her fucking pierced tongue. *Dammit.*

That whole night, right up to the last few minutes, had been great. Without saying anything to Frank or Garrett, he’d called on some Sons contacts to help get the word out about the party, and Sons step up when a brother asks. The place had been rocking from the moment they opened the doors until an hour later than they’d planned to stay open, and people had their wallets out the whole time. It was so great to see Frank’s reaction to the register total. She was euphoric. And then she was in his arms. And then his tongue was in her mouth.

And then she was telling him she didn’t want him because he was a Son.

He was disappointed and hurt. The whole thing would be easier if he could just be pissed at her, but he couldn’t. He understood. His life freaked *him* out more days than not, especially now that they were all mixed up in Mexican cartel shit. She was smart to stay away.

Problem was, he’d had more than two months to get to know her, and he was pretty well hooked. She was awesome. Smart, funny, into the same stuff he was, and hot as fuck. He loved hanging out with her. With all the intense shit the Sons were dealing with, it was nice to be able to relax and just be a geek with her. He wished he could be friends like she wanted. But he started out wanting to get into her pants, and now he wanted to get into her life. All the way.

He missed Garrett, too. It had been a long time since he’d had “normal” people in his life, and he hadn’t realized how much he’d been missing. He loved his club and his brothers. He would do anything for them. Die for them. They’d given him a place to belong and be accepted when he had nothing. But sometimes the life was almost too much. It had been nice to have friends who didn’t talk about guns and drugs and blood and retaliation. Unless they were playing GTA or something. He was really sorry to lose that.

OOO

A couple of hours later, he and Chibs walked out of the shop. Chibs was feeling much better, making jokes. A satisfied customer. Juice had a moment of feeling pretty relaxed and okay. And then a Fed cruiser pulled right up between them and their bikes.

They cuffed Juice and hauled him in on a parole violation, for weed he had a goddamn card for. As he sat in the back of the cruiser he looked over and saw Frank, standing next to a sidewalk sign she'd just put out, watching him being taken away by the cops. His luck, she'd probably seen him get frisked and cuffed, too. *Fuck.*

OOO

It was late when they released him uncharged. He'd been pulled in so the Feds could lean on him. Juice's biggest, most damaging secret was on the line. They knew Juice's father was black. That information could get him killed. Blacks weren't allowed to be Sons. Brown was fine—being Puerto Rican (on his mother's side, obviously) was not a problem. But he couldn't be a Son and have a black father. That he'd withheld that kind of information might even be deadly. To him.

His father wasn't on his birth certificate, so he didn't know how they had even *gotten* that fucking information. But they had it, and they were threatening to share it with Clay and Jax unless Juice cooperated. They wanted information about the cartel. Said they'd leave the club alone if Juice gave up info on the bigger player. A rat. If he gave information on *any* player, for *any* reason, and the club found out about it, he was dead. Looked like he was probably dead any way this played out.

He didn't know what to do, where to turn. He felt lost and scared. He felt alone.

He was parked on the street next to the driveway leading to Frank's apartment, looking up at the windows over the garage, which were shining with golden light. She was home and awake. He'd hacked her info right after he'd met her, but he'd never come here before, since she hadn't offered her address. He wasn't sure why he was here now, except that he really wanted to see her. Even just to sit with her. He needed a friend.

He walked up the driveway and climbed the steps. He could hear Social Distortion coming loud and clear through her front door. Frank liked her music loud, for sure. He stood there for a second, trying to decide if this was a horrible idea that would just make him feel worse. He wasn't sure. Maybe, but he was here now. He knocked.

She answered the door in a tight, short, sleeveless vintage Police concert t-shirt (Juice noted the irony) and nothing else but a small pair of striped boy-cut underwear. She had a paintbrush in her hand and a smear of cobalt blue paint on her left cheek. Her hair was loose and pulled over to the right side of her head, laying sexily against her face and draping over her chest. It was still black. She dyed it a lot; Juice had seen it in three different hues already, but she seemed to like it black and had come back to it and now stuck with it for awhile. He liked it—it set off her intense eyes. He had no idea what her natural hair color was.

She smiled hugely when she saw him. “Juuuice! What are yooou doing here? Do I have a genie? Did I get wishes? Get on iiii here, sexybutt!” The cadence of her speech was off, and she was looking with intense focus at a point slightly past his right ear. She just stood there in the middle of the doorway, her face kinda frozen, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was in her underwear. Also, she’d just called him “sexybutt.” *Shit*. She was tripping.

“Frank, are you tripping?” He nudged her a little, and she refocused and stepped back to let him in.

She wasn’t wearing her glasses or any makeup at all. He thought maybe she was even prettier undone. Her eyes, man. Her eyes . . . were practically black right now. Her pupils were huge, rimmed with a thin border of icy blue. Oh, yeah. Definitely tripping.

She giggled. “Maybe. Who’s asking? You want a tab? Or a couple? A few? Several? Say when!”

The mood he was in, the last thing in the world he wanted was to trip. No telling where he’d go, but most likely nowhere good. “I’ll pass. Thanks, though. You okay? How many did you take?”

Her smile was wide and innocent. “Just three.” Three tabs was a fair amount of acid, especially for someone as little as Frank. She was likely on a pretty fine trip. “I’m most excellent, thanks. I’ve been painting. The colors are amAAYzing. She gestured toward a little kitchen area. “Help yourself to whatever. I need to feel this. *Paint* this, I mean. Or both, I guess. Whatever.” She went over to an easel near a wall of windows and started brushing paint on canvas. He was at the wrong angle to see what she was painting, so he looked around at her place. He liked it. It suited her.

It was one big room, with the kitchenette on a raised area along one wall. Not much room for cooking, he guessed, but there was a small range, a small fridge, and a microwave. A little round table and two chairs. The rest of the room looked mainly like a living room. A big, comfy-looking futon, folded out like a bed, in the center on a braided rug. A small desk with a Mac laptop on it and several buckets of colored pens and pencils—and a huge orange cat hunkered under it, glaring at him. A bunch of giant, square pillows on the floor. The biggest piece of furniture was an IKEA bookcase/entertainment center thing that took up one whole wall, with a TV, an Xbox, a PS3, an actual *turntable*, on which a Social Distortion album currently spun, and rows of books, games, CDs, DVDs, and albums. He was pretty impressed.

A few vintage concert posters—The Velvet Underground, Rancid, The Ramones, Iggy Pop—hung in frames on the walls. Otherwise the walls were covered with paintings on unframed canvases. He wondered if they were hers. They were vividly colorful and funky, mostly shapes and swirls without any recognizable image. But as he looked at any of them for any length of time, they made him feel something—one made him uncomfortable, another calm. He didn’t know why, but he supposed that’s what art was meant to do. There were several stacks of canvases leaning against the walls, too.

He also noticed a pair of tattered ballet slippers hanging by their ribbons on the wall next to the kitchen cabinets, under two framed photos—one of a whole group of girls posed in tutus, and

another of a strawberry blonde ballerina in a white tutu, up high on her toes, the way ballerinas did. Was that Frank? He looked over at her.

And there was the wall of windows, the easel, and Frank in her underwear. Watching her paint, Juice forgot what he was doing over here in the corner. He'd never seen so much of her body, of course. Her waist was narrow, her hips just wide enough and her ass just round enough to be shapely. Her stomach was firm and perfectly flat. Her hipbones pushed her underwear away from her belly slightly. Her arms and legs were slender but not bony. She had a dancer's body. Huh. Her thighs didn't meet in the middle, and he caught himself staring between them.

He wondered if he should say anything about her lack of pants. He figured yes, he probably should, and the longer he waited the weirder it would get. "Uh, Frank?"

It took her a minute. He could almost see the sound waves rolling over to her. If he'd taken her up on the tabs, he probably would have been able to literally see them, now that he was thinking about it. Then she looked over and smiled sweetly at him. "Juuuice. You're so awesome."

He chuckled. Frank on acid was pretty damned adorable. "You're not wearing any pants, baby."

The "baby" had slipped out. He spent way too much time thinking about her as someone to be with. His fantasies were bleeding over into real life. *Shit*. He waited, tense, to see if she'd have a problem with it.

It didn't seem like she even noticed. She looked down at her underwear and laughed. "Whoops! Oh, well. It doesn't bother you, does it?"

Uh, no. It didn't bother him. "If you're comfortable, it's fine with me."

"Well, good then. Hey, would you bring me a glass of water? My mouth is really dry all of a sudden. Like desert dry. The Sahara." Her eyes widened. "No—the *Gobi*." She stopped, a look on her face. Probably tasting sand in her mouth.

He smiled. He bet her mouth was dry. He took a glass from a shelf above the counter and filled it from the tap. He brought it to her. Then he took a look at the painting she was working on. Yeah, the art on the walls was hers. She had a distinctive style. This one was beautiful—the colors swirling elaborately into each other. It was mostly done in what seemed like dozens of different hues of blue and green, with a thin red seam running riot through it. It seemed sad, somehow.

He turned to her. She was looking up at him fixedly. He couldn't tell if she had zoned out or zoned in. "What do you think?" she asked. Zoned in, apparently. He looked back at the painting.

"It's amazing, Frank. Really beautiful. It's sad, though. Or it feels kinda sad."

She sighed. "Yeah. I paint my mood, mostly."

He turned back to her. "You're sad? Why?"

She set the empty glass down on a stool near the easel and put her hands on her hips. She looked up at him and met his eyes. “Why do you think?” Then she seemed to see something above his head and moved closer to him. Right up against him, actually. Still looking over his head—or above his eyes, at least—she stretched her hand up. Then he felt her fingers on his scalp, tracing the edge of his tattoo. *Fuck*. He closed his eyes for a second.

Then he grabbed her hand gently and brought it down. “Frank . . .” was all he could say. The way she was looking at him was seriously testing his control. He needed her a lot just now.

She licked her lips, her tongue darting out just enough to flash the stud in it. “Frank,” he said again. She put her hands on either side of his face. This was just not fair. He brushed the paint smear on her cheek with his thumb.

“You are beautiful,” she whispered. He smiled. He was pretty sure no one had ever called him beautiful before. She pulled his face down. He started to resist. She was altered. He was taking advantage. This would change nothing, except that it would be even harder for him to stay away.

And then he just didn’t care. He needed to be close to her. He *needed* it. He’d barely thought of all his Sons shit since he’d come through her door. He put his arms around her and leaned down to meet her lips.

This time there was no reservation whatsoever in her kiss. Her tongue was in his mouth almost instantly, the stud rubbing along his tongue. He’d been hard since she’d opened her front door, but now he was so swollen it was painful. He kissed her back like he was never going to get another chance. Maybe he wasn’t.

He bent his knees and put his hands on her ass, lifting her up. She weighed almost nothing. She wrapped her legs around him, her barely-covered crotch right on his cock. He groaned. Still kissing deeply, he walked them over to her futon. He wasn’t familiar with her place, so he hoped he was pointed in the right direction, and he hoped he didn’t trip over anything on the way.

His shin hit the futon, and he leaned over and laid her down on it. He pulled back, and she sat up and grabbed at the zipper of his hoodie. He unzipped it and took it and his kutte off, dropping them on the floor. She pulled up on the bottom of his t-shirt, and he pulled that over his head and dropped it, too. Then he lay down just to her side, leaning over her, trying to keep his weight off her small frame. He propped on his forearms, his hands around her face, and kissed her again.

They kissed hard and deep for a few minutes, Frank moaning faintly every now and then, and then Juice felt her pushing on his chest. He pulled back, panting. “You okay, baby?” Again with the “baby.” He had to get control of that.

“I want to be on top.”

He grinned. “Sure thing.” He slid his arms under her back, then rolled over. She sat up and straddled him. She just sat there astride him, her slight weight making his cock throb, looking

down at him. With intent focus, she ran her fingers all over him, tracing the tattoos on his arms, the defining lines of his muscles, swirling intricate, invisible patterns all over his skin. He closed his eyes and just took in the feel of her hands on him. Then she leaned over, and he felt her mouth on him, her pierced tongue lapping at his neck, then down in a line to a nipple. She sucked, and then drew the stud over the sensitive flesh. He groaned and clutched her head to him. She licked and lapped her way to the other nipple and did the same thing. “God, Frank,” he whispered.

When he felt her tongue make a path down his belly, he grabbed her arms and pulled her up. He knew where she was headed, and he thought he would probably embarrass himself righteously if he felt that stud on his cock right now. She sat back and smiled. Then she pulled her t-shirt off.

Her left nipple was pierced. *Jesus Christ*. Her breasts were firm and round, each just shy of a perfect handful. And there was that gleaming silver ring. He sat up and put his mouth on her left breast, sucking the ring in. She gasped and arched her back. He took the ring in his teeth and pulled gently. She cried out, “Oh fuck, yeah!” and flexed her hips hard against his cock. His jeans were fucking killing him.

He pulled her to him for a kiss. Then he rolled them back over so he was on top. He was so hot for her. He felt like he had hold of just the barest thread of control. She was squirming under him, rubbing against him in all the right ways. He wanted to taste her. He kissed and sucked his way down her neck, over her chest to her unadorned nipple, suckling it long and hard as she gasped and flexed. Then he worked his way back to the ring and took it in his teeth again. She arched sharply and moaned, her hands on his head, her short nails scratching at his mohawk.

As he was kissing a line down her belly, she sighed and said, “Oh, Juice. God, I want you so much. I want to trip forever so I never regret this.”

His hands on her underwear, about to pull them off her hips, he froze. She whimpered and lifted her hips at him, oblivious to what she’d just said.

He stayed motionless for several beats, trying to sort out his feelings. They were too unruly to be sorted yet, but he knew he and Frank were done here. He kissed her belly and sat back.

She looked at him. “Why’d you stop?”

He wondered if she’d ever know what happened. Maybe not. He wasn’t going to tell her. He just needed to get out of here. He leaned over and grabbed up his clothes. He pulled his t-shirt over his head and stood up. “I have to go. I’ll see you.” Then he just left, catching a glimpse of a gorgeous, nearly nude Frank still lying panting and spread across her futon as he closed her door.

Yep. Coming to see her was a horrible idea that had just made him feel worse.

## CHAPTER 6:

### “I Hate Everything about You,” Three Days Grace

Frank couldn't remember ever being in such a black mood. Not even when her parents' car had crashed. Then she'd been consumed by fear and sadness, but everyone had made way for the orphans, so she'd had permission and space to feel bad. Plus, she'd had Garrett going through it with her.

Now? Now she was enraged. She was hurt. She was abso-fuckin-lutely *mortified*. But she had no place to put all that. She wanted to put it right down Juice's throat, on the end of her fist. He'd just walked the fuck away last night, leaving her lying there, spread wide and offering herself up on a motherfucking *platter*. And then her sweet little trip had taken a hairpin turn.

Jesus. What an idiot she'd been. What a whore. Fucking acid. All “*pretty pretty colors, pretty pretty feelings, pretty pretty Juice.*” She'd tripped to try to paint something new, get out of the rut she'd found herself in. She was home alone, doing her own thing, minding her own fucking business. She wasn't expecting company, especially not him. And what the fuck had he been doing there, anyway? She'd never told him where she lived! She'd made a point not to tell him!

He'd hacked her, of course. Had to be. Fucking creeper. Perv. Asshole. Douchebag. She couldn't think of a foul enough word.

*DAMMIT DAMMIT DAMMIT DAMMIT FUCK!*

In her fury, she'd clutched the charcoal tightly in her fist, and now she saw that she'd made a complete fuckup of the figure she was drawing. Perched in the center of a ring of easels was this unit's nude model, a tall, full figured woman with a long, loose mop of curly auburn hair. Frank had really been enjoying drawing her beautiful, richly curved body in various poses, but now, in about two strokes of her wooden fist, she'd managed to turn her into Jabba the fucking Hut.

Just then, Andre walked up behind her. “Apparently, folks, Miss Duvall sees our lovely subject as a collection of rotted, misshapen melons. I'm sure Celia won't take offense, will you, dear?”

The class tittered vaguely. They were well trained not to get too much glee from the pain of others, since any one of them could end up skewered on the point of Andre's tongue.

This was not the day for Andre to target Frank, though. Not the day at all. She dragged the charcoal viciously back and forth across the paper. He stood there smugly, eyebrow arched. What a fucking cliché he was. Then she ripped the page off the easel, wadded it up, and threw it in his face. “Go blow yourself, you self-important, flaccid prick.”

She grabbed her bag off the floor. She stormed out of class, kicking her easel to the ground as she passed it. She winced a little and shook it off.

She guessed she was going to have to retake Advanced Life Drawing next semester.

OOO

By the time she got to the shop, her mood was even worse, and she wouldn't have thought that possible. But now she could add her temper tantrum probably fucking up her spring course schedule, maybe even graduation. No way Andre would pass her after that display. She blamed Juice for that, too.

But she blamed herself, too. Laying it out there like that. Slut.

She was reorganizing the games on the floor. Every fucking day either she or Garrett—usually she—had to go through the whole floor stock and pull the PS3 games off the Xbox shelves and vice versa, the used games off the new game shelves and vice versa, the comic books off the floor. Everything had to be re-alphabetized. People were such assholes. She hated every last fucking one of them.

She heard a Harley roar down Crestview and pull up outside. Must be him. Creeper. She kicked a display, then groaned and bent carefully down to pick up the memory sticks she'd jostled off their pegs. "I'm going in back, Garry." She stalked past him, into the back room.

Garrett followed her. "What is *up* with you today, sissy? Something you want to talk about?"

"If I wanted to fucking talk about anything, don't you think I would have fucking *talked*?" She knew she was basically the only person on the planet who could make Garrett lose his cool, and she was spoiling for a fight. She needed to direct this shit somewhere other than inward.

"Listen, you bratty little elf"—if that was the worst thing he could think of to call her, she'd have to work harder—"whatever your drama is, don't take it out on me. Or the store. Be a grownup. Give it a try. For once."

"Bite me, asshole."

He shook his head, turned around, and went back onto the floor. Well, that was unsatisfying. She made a face, mocking his words in a mincing little voice: "Be a grownup. Give it a try. For once." Then she was struck by the irony of her incredibly childish response, and she laughed at little.

Okay, that felt better. The need to torment cuddly puppies or something wasn't so pressing.

OOO

As they were closing out a few hours later, Garrett looked at her. "You seem like you're feeling better."

Not better, really, but her explosive fury had backed down to a radioactive simmer. "Yeah, a little. Rough night, rough day."

“You sure you don’t want to talk?” He turned the key in the register and pulled it out.

She pulled the security gate across the front of the store. “Nothing really to talk about. Just my usual drama.” That was a lie, but she was *way* too embarrassed to even nod toward the problem.

Garrett killed the shop lights, and they walked into the back room. As she was grabbing her bag, he picked up a controller and waved it at her. “Kick your ass in COD?”

She wasn’t in a huge rush to return to the scene of her disgrace, and blowing shit up was pretty much tops on her list of things she wanted to do right now, so she dropped her bag and walked over. She picked up another controller. “If you’re good and eat your veggies, big brother, and you wish really hard, someday that just might happen.”

OOO

Well past midnight, Garrett cried uncle. “Jesus, sis, what is going on? You’re playing like you actually want to blow my guts out. Or somebody’s, anyway.” He turned off the game and turned to her. “Is all this about Juice?”

She flinched at the name. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, sissy, don’t play coy. I’ve got eyes. I was standing right there when you two kissed, and I haven’t seen him since. What happened? I think you’re great together.”

Frank laughed bitterly. “Are you actually saying that you’d be okay with your baby sister fucking a Son?”

He winced, and she wished she hadn’t been so blunt. “It sounds ugly that way. I’m saying that I like Juice. I see how he treats you. I see how he looks at you. I see you light up around him. I don’t really care about the biker thing, as long as that stays on the outside. I think he’d keep you away from all that, take good care of you. He’s a good guy.”

Again, her laugh was harsh. “Fat lot you know.”

That had his attention. He sat fully upright and leaned toward her. “Frenchie. Did he do something to you?”

As soon as he called her Frenchie, she had to fight back a lump in her throat, and that spiked her anger high. She didn’t cry. *She did not fucking cry.* She kicked out at him across the couch, making hard contact on his thigh. “Don’t fucking call me that, Garrett! Why would you *do* that?”

Their parents had called her Frenchie. Garrett had, too, back then; it had been her only-for-family name. She stopped answering to it as soon as the cops left their living room. She stopped crying permanently four days later, when they left the cemetery, walking hand in hand to their empty house. Six years ago.

“Answer me. Did he do something to you?” Frank saw something ignite in the background of her steady, Zen-like brother’s eyes. Rage.

But what was her answer? Yes. He’d done something to her. But what? Not what Garrett was thinking. Closer to the opposite of that, really. Or was it? He’d shown up unannounced, uninvited. She’d been vulnerable, pretty far off-world. He’d gotten her into bed. But he hadn’t forced her, not by any stretch. And he’d stopped.

But *that’s* why she was so upset. He’d stopped. She’d been totally open to him, and he’d just walked away from her. It was so goddamn humiliating. Why had he fucking left like that?

She still hadn’t answered Garrett. Now he grabbed her shoulders and shook her gently to regain her attention. “Frank, you have to tell me. Right now. I’m imagining some very bad shit.”

The only answer she had was the truth, so she told him what happened. Everything until Juice left, anyway. He didn’t need to know the rest. Nobody did.

## CHAPTER 7:

“The Limerick Rake,” The Pogues

“Promise,” Violent Femmes

Juice tipped his head back on the wall of the clubhouse weight room and closed his eyes while the Crow Eater on her knees in front of him—Renee, maybe? Rhonda? Something with an R, he thought—worked his cock. He supposed she was good at this. She should be, she got plenty of practice. But whatever. He could barely care enough to stay hard. He had other things on his mind.

He hadn't seen Frank at all since he'd walked out of her apartment. More than a month. He'd mostly stayed away from Crestview Avenue, rarely even going to the weed shop. It's not like he had any real work to do there, and no way he wanted to chance running into Frank or Garrett.

He never had a second anymore that he wasn't thinking about her. On a constant Sensurround loop in his head: the feel her tongue and hands on him, his on her, her legs around his hips. The taste of her breast in his mouth. The sight of her belly twitching under his touch. The sweet smell of her. The sound of her gasps and sighs.

Of her words.

He felt seventeen different kinds of bad about that night. He'd taken advantage of her. He'd been charmed by her, tripping around in her little striped panties, and he'd needed someone to make him forget his shit and feel good for a while. But he should've left before she kissed him. He shouldn't have gone over there at all.

He felt guilty about all of that. He felt awful. But what really killed him was her stubborn insistence, even tripping, that being with him was something she would regret.

The worst part was that she would be *right* to regret being with him. He was bad fucking news, getting worse all the time. Since he'd met her, it seemed like he was firing a gun into some guy's face every other day. The Sons were deep in the middle of a fucking drug cartel war, and they were in way over their heads. It made him sick, but there was no way out of it.

And the Feds had dragged him in a couple more times, leaning hard on him to rat out the cartel, hanging his black father over his head like the sword of Damocles. Something else he had no way out of.

He didn't know what the fuck had happened to his life or who the fuck he even was.

He just wanted one good thing. He wanted Frank. But he didn't deserve anything like her.

He wasn't paying much attention to what was going on below his waist. But eventually, his body responded. Whatshername stayed on him, catching his load in her mouth. Her gift to him, he guessed.

Merry fucking Christmas.

OOO

A week and a half later, Juice was sitting at the bar working on some club intel, laptop open in front of him, when Rat came in from the garage and told him there was a guy outside to see him. His mohawk prickled. With the Feds riding his ass, all he could think of was trouble. The year had started off with nothing but.

The Lobo cartel had hit the club in the dark early of Christmas morning, burning Happy's house, with his whole family in it, to the ground. Happy had been here, getting blown, just like most of the Sons, Juice included. Only innocents killed. Women and children. Drug cartels went straight to the heart when they sent a message. They targeted loved ones. The club had spent the next week in lockdown, only opening back up a couple of days ago. Juice told himself he was glad he hadn't gotten closer to Frank. She was safe because she wasn't in his life.

He got up and walked outside. Garrett was looking uncomfortable, standing in the lot near the garage bays, next to a very respectable, silver, late-model Honda Odyssey with a magnetic sign for Level Up on the driver's door. He was obviously out of place, wearing dark, hipster-skinny jeans, white Chucks, a green knit sweater hoodie, and a black wool blazer. Opie and Chibs were sitting on one of the picnic tables, considering Garrett with suspicion. He was almost as tall as Ope, but any Son could break him over his knee like a dry twig. Garrett knew it.

The way he'd left it with Frank, Juice couldn't think of any friendly reason for Garrett to come to the compound. He and Frank were close, so Juice was sure she'd told him. But Garrett was a good friend, or he had been, and Juice had earned whatever it was he needed to deal out.

"Garrett. It's good to see you, man." He held out his hand. Garrett took it, and Juice pulled him in for a quick hug. Garrett seemed to pull back at first, but then he went with it.

"Yeah." He looked around. Juice did, too, and saw that Opie and Chibs were definitely paying attention. Garrett turned back to Juice, his pale blue eyes, so like his sister's, serious behind his wire-framed glasses. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Juice thought for a second. He didn't know what Garrett wanted, but he couldn't see him pulling a gun or anything like that. He couldn't even see him trying to throw a punch, though with the right provocation—defending his baby sister, for instance—then, yeah. If Garrett wanted to give him a beating, so be it. "Yeah. Come with me." He led his friend into the clubhouse.

As they passed the bar, Juice told Bobby, "This is Garrett, a friend. He needs to talk. We're going back to the office for a minute."

Bobby looked a little puzzled, but he nodded at Garrett and said, "Kay." Juice heard Opie and Chibs coming back into the clubhouse, too. Everyone was always on alert these days, suspicious of any new person or thing. It sucked.

In the office, Juice directed Garrett toward a chair. He took it, and Juice sat down at the desk. “What’s up, Garrett?”

“I’ve been looking for you on Crestview, but I haven’t seen you there in weeks. You avoiding something?”

Juice looked down at his lap, then back up at his friend. “What did Frank tell you?”

“She told me what happened. If you want to tell me from your perspective, I’m open.”

His perspective was irrelevant, far as he was concerned. He had no right to defend himself. “Whatever she told you is all that matters.”

Garrett studied him for awhile, and then he nodded. “That’s a good answer. It tells me I was right to come here. What Frank doesn’t know, what’s driving her crazy and making her sick, and a big reason I’m here, is *why*. Why were you there? Why did you stay? Why did you leave like that? If you don’t want to tell me, I understand, but you have *got* to tell her, man.

“If you do that, you and I are good, however it turns out between you two. If you don’t, if you leave her eating at herself like this, you and I are very much not good. I know that I’m not intimidating, especially not around here, but I promise. If you don’t help her, I will find a way to fuck you up.”

Juice wasn’t sure what to make of what he was hearing. Frank was sick? What did Garrett mean, “eating at herself”? Christ, what had he done? And why the *fuck* wasn’t Garrett trying to fuck him up right now? Why was he even giving him a chance to fix it?

Garrett stood up. “She’s closing the shop with me tonight. Come to the back door around 9:00. I’ll make sure you have some time alone with her. She won’t like it; she’ll be pissed at us both, but I don’t care.” He held out his hand.

Juice stood up and shook it. “Thanks, man. I’ll be there.” Garrett started to turn toward the door, but Juice had a question. “Garrett, how are you okay with this? I’d think you’d want me far away from your little sister. Especially now.”

Garrett turned back to face him. He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and looked down at the floor for several long seconds. Then he looked Juice in the eye. “I was twenty-three when our folks died. Frank was sixteen. I’d just graduated from college and was planning on being far from Charming as fast as possible. Instead, I went from being her big brother to her parent overnight, just when she was figuring out what kind of woman—what kind of person—she wanted to be.”

He walked over to the bulletin board, made a pretense of looking at the snapshots pinned there. “She wasn’t anything like she is now when she had a mom and dad. She was a little princess. She loved ballet. She loved stuffed animals. She loved going to the mall with all her vapid little pink girlfriends. She loved Coldplay and thought that made her edgy and deep. She was into art,

and she was damn good even back then, but mostly she made pretty pictures. She drew flowers on everything.

“She got hard after our folks died—she would say she got tough, but hard is what it is. It didn’t happen all at once, but it started right away. Before she was nineteen, she had about a million holes in her body and a lifetime of ink. It’s all armor, and it keeps most people, especially around here, at a safe distance.

“It’s who she is now, and I think she’s amazing. But she built herself a thick, strong shell, and I’m the only person she’s ever let inside it. There’s a soft little heart in there. I’ve been worried that no one but me was ever going to get to it. But after watching what she’s been going through for the past month or so, I’m pretty sure you got in.”

Juice looked at him, trying to process the huge pile of information and insight he’d just gotten. Garrett was telling him something, but he couldn’t recalibrate fast enough to figure it out. After a minute, he had to just ask. “What are you telling me?”

Garrett huffed. “She’s in love with you, man. And I’m trusting you to take care of her. Make her happy and keep her safe. Whatever you need to keep her safe from.”

OOO

Juice was sure to be there at nine on the dot. He was nervous. He knocked, and Garrett answered the door within seconds. He stepped back to let Juice enter. “Be ready. She’s going to want to boil our balls in a soup.”

Not a pleasant image, but an effective one. “Is it such a good idea, then?” Juice didn’t want to make anything worse.

“Trust me. It’s necessary. You’ll see.”

Frank walked in from the front then. At first, Juice was just thrilled to be in the same room with her again. She’d dyed her hair platinum blonde, almost silver. She was wearing a plain white t-shirt, a little faded denim skirt, ripped black fishnets, and her shiny blue Docs.

Jesus, she was skinny. She looked at least ten pounds lighter. Ten pounds she’d needed to keep. No way she broke even 100 pounds now.

She froze when she saw Juice, her eyes wide. “Oh, Garrett, you have got to be fucking kidding me, you motherfucker. I fucking hate you.” She turned hard on her heel and stormed out to the front.

Garrett said, “Excuse me,” and ran through the back room, following her. Juice heard a full-throated female scream. “WHAT THE FUCK YOU ASSHOLE PUT ME THE FUCK DOWN I HATE YOU HATE YOU *HATE YOU!*” Garrett walked back in carrying his baby sister around

her waist, her back against his chest, her arms and legs going energetically for any part of him she could reach. Juice gulped.

Garrett set her down and moved quickly to turn her to face him and pin her arms down along her sides. She stopped fighting and lased him with her eyes instead, her little chest heaving. The look he was getting was the kind of look that made a guy afraid to sleep unguarded.

Juice was stunned—he'd caused all this?

“Listen to me, sissy. You are going to talk to Juice. I mean it. I don't care how you resolve it, but you are going to resolve it. Tonight. I am worried about you, and I'm not letting it go on. You need to eat. You need to sleep. You need to give a shit. So you aren't leaving this room until something gets worked out.”

She kicked him, hard, in the shin with one of those big boots. He winced but stood steady. “Do what you need to do, sis. You're still going to talk to Juice.”

She huffed and shrugged his hands off. He let her go, staying watchful and ready. She turned and faced Juice, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. “I have nothing to say to you, dickwad, but if you have something to say, then say it.”

Garrett looked over at Juice, indicated with a tip of his head and a jerk of his thumb that he'd be in front, and walked out, closing the door behind him. He was limping.

*Christ.* Juice didn't know where to start or what to do. He took a couple of steps toward her. She took several steps back, putting the desk between them. “Frank, I'm really sorry.”

“Kiss my ass.”

He walked over to the couch. “Will you sit down with me?”

“Fuck you.”

Standing in front of the couch, he sighed and closed his eyes, trying to work out his play here. He opened his eyes and met hers. He saw dark circles behind the lenses of her glasses, visible even behind the heavy liner and mascara. Goddammit. He'd done that. He decided to jump right to the meat. “Garrett told me that you need to know why I did what I did. All the things that I did.”

“Whatever. He's dead to me now.”

“Come on, Frank. He loves you. He's looking out for you. You're lucky.” He walked around the couch toward her. Barricaded behind the desk, she stayed put.

She sneered. “Don't you tell me what I am, asshole.”

Yeah, that shell Garrett was talking about was at max level right now. Okay. Going in again. “I want to tell you about that night. It’s a long story. We should sit.”

“I was there, douchebag. It’s not that long a story. It’s really fucking short, actually. It starts with you coming to my apartment uninvited and ends with you getting me naked and leaving me lying there wide open. There. Now our talk is over. Get out.” She moved around the desk toward the front door. He took a couple of long strides and grabbed her arm—not hard, just to stop her. His hand completely encircled her bicep, his thumb overlapping his fingers. *God.*

She hauled off and punched him, an uppercut to his jaw that had the full force of her little body behind it. He bit his tongue and tasted blood. He let her go and put his hand to his mouth. She stared at him, shaking her hand, her mesmerizing eyes wide.

And then she just went at him.

She hit him again and again, mainly in the chest and gut, barely making a sound other than little grunts of exertion. He stood there and took it all. Her little fists weren’t doing much damage, but it hurt for other reasons. Guilt, mainly. When he started to worry that she was hurting herself, he grabbed her hands in his and pulled her close. She strained against his hold for a second, and then she relaxed on him, exhausted.

“Baby, please come sit on the couch with me.” She flinched when he called her “baby,” but this time he wasn’t sorry he’d said it. She looked up at him. There was no anger in her eyes now. Now she merely looked depleted. That freaked him out more than anything that had happened since Garrett had let him in.

He gently pulled her toward the couch. She let him lead her. He sat her down and sat next to her, keeping her hands in one of his. With his other hand, he brushed her ponytail back over her shoulder. She shrugged him off. “I’m so sorry.”

She just looked at him.

He took a breath and looked down at their hands. “I came to your apartment that night because I’d had a really bad day, and I wanted to see you. I think you saw that I got picked up by the cops that afternoon.” He looked up at her. Her expression was inscrutable. He cleared his throat.

“They were just showing me who’s boss, but they kept me a long time and messed with my head. I was feeling bad when they let me go. Lonely. I missed you, and I felt like I really needed to see you.”

He looked down again. “I know where you live because I hacked your info.” She shook his hand off of hers and crossed her arms. He looked up to see her eyes narrowed. “I know, I’m sorry. I did it pretty much right after we met, when I knew I was interested in you. It’s a thing Sons do. It’s part of my job with the club—I do it for any girl a member gets involved with. We have to protect ourselves. We have to know if someone we connect with is vulnerable, because that makes us vulnerable. It sucks, but it’s necessary.”

Now she spoke. “Are you saying that you know all my private information? Financial? School? All of it? What about Garrett?”

*Fuck.* “Yes. Garrett, too.”

“Jesus motherfucking Christ. I feel sick. I was even more naked than I fucking thought.” She started to get up, but he put his hand on her thigh and held her down. She turned a venomous look on him.

“Please, Frank. Let me just say it all. I won’t stop you after that.” She sat back, her expression unsoftened.

“I know that’s hard to hear. But it’s not what I feel really bad about. That’s my job. I hate myself for what happened in your apartment, though.”

She took a long breath and closed her eyes. She didn’t open them. He thought he understood why. “There are lots of things I shouldn’t have done that night. I shouldn’t have been there. I shouldn’t have come in, especially once I saw you were tripping and barely had any clothes on. I shouldn’t have kissed you. I shouldn’t have let it go on. And I shouldn’t have left after I got control of myself and stopped. Not like I did, anyway. I ran away. I am really fucking sorry for all of that. No excuse. My reason is that I was lonely and missed you.”

Her eyes were still closed, but she asked, her voice low, “Why did you run away?”

Juice was quiet at first, trying to think how to explain it—not excuse it, just have it make some kind of sense. “You said something right before I stopped. Do you remember?” She opened her eyes and looked at him, brow furrowed, questioning. No, she didn’t.

“You said that you wished you could stay on that trip forever so you’d never have to regret what we were doing.” Her eyes got big then, but she didn’t say anything. “Right away I remembered two important things. The most important was that I was being a total asshole and taking advantage of you when you weren’t straight. But I want you so bad, and you were so open to me, that I didn’t trust myself to stay. I had to leave right then. I know it was shitty. Again, no excuse. Just a reason.”

He met her eyes, trying not to plead for her understanding or forgiveness, trying to let her feel however she needed to feel. He ended as he’d begun. “I’m so sorry.”

They sat there for a couple of minutes in silence. Then, she sat forward a little, and Juice was encouraged by that small move closer to him. She asked, “What was the second thing?”

“What?”

“You said you remembered two things. What was the second thing?”

He sure wished he'd phrased that differently. The second thing wasn't important right now. But he knew if he deflected her question, that tiny crack in her defense he thought he saw when she leaned forward would fill in with concrete.

"The second thing was that in your right mind you don't want to be with me."

She stood up. He let her; he'd said what he needed to say. If she was leaving, he had no right to stop her. But she just stood in front of the couch.

Finally she turned and looked down at him, her hands on her hips. "You are a fucking asshole, you know that?"

"Yeah, I do. I am."

"I wish I'd never met you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You have turned everything the fuck upside down."

"I don't know how to make it right. I would if I knew how."

She took a step closer to him. "How do you feel about me?"

Pretty much the last thing he was expecting. "What?" She said nothing, just raised her eyebrows expectantly, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know what you want, Frank."

"I want you to answer the fucking question. With the whole truth. No games. How do you feel about me?"

Despite what Garrett had told him, he was fully prepared for this to be a way for her to get some retribution for leaving her vulnerable and alone that night. He went for it anyway, and told her the truth, his eyes locked on hers. "I'm in love with you."

Shocking the absolute shit out of him, she straddled his thighs and sat on his lap. "Okay, then. Always forward." She took off her glasses and set them on the arm of the couch. And she kissed him.

It took him a beat or two to respond; what was happening wasn't even the last thing he was expecting. It wasn't in the same *galaxy* as anything he was expecting. He was experiencing a serious case of mental and emotional whiplash. The girl who had gone apeshit half an hour ago over the prospect of being in the same room with him was now in his lap with her tongue in his mouth. Her magnificent tongue. In his mouth.

Okay then, indeed.

He wrapped his arms around her, remarking to himself again how damn skinny she'd gotten—the girl needed a milkshake and a double cheeseburger, STAT—and launched himself wholeheartedly into the kiss.

Her stud grazed the part of his tongue he'd bitten when she'd clocked him, and it stung a mite. More than a mite, really. But, geez, whatever. Sting away. He'd thought her kiss in her apartment had been unreserved. But that was a sweet kiss during a mellow trip. There was a *lot* of powerful emotion behind what was happening now. And everybody involved was fully present.

He slid his hands up her back and over her shoulders, leaning her back as he moved his mouth to kiss along her jaw and down her neck. She tipped her head way back, arching against his hands, pressing her chest against him. He nipped a little at her neck, and she gasped. Her shirt was in the way; he couldn't get to any more of her skin. He pulled her back up so he could take her lips again.

She held him off. He stopped and looked at her, panting, feeling nearly desperate, but not about to push anything. Her eyes bored into his. "This is how you make it right, Juice. Love me. Make *me* right."

He put his hands on the back of her head and pushed her firmly against his mouth, trying with his kiss to tell her that he was sorry, that he would never hurt her again, that he loved her like crazy.

She moaned and rocked hard on him, her fingers scratching at his scalp. Juice thrust his hips up against her, feeling her heat. He tightened his arms around her and turned them both so they were lying on the couch, his body over hers, her legs bent at his hips. She crossed her ankles against his back.

He leaned on one arm and ran the other along her leg, the fishnet tights rough and sexy against his palm. He slid all the way up, under her little skirt, and wrapped his hand around her cheek. She gasped and flexed her hips against him. His cock throbbed hard.

"God, Frank. *God*. I want to feel all of you."

She moaned and bit his lower lip. But then she pushed at him. "Wait—wait, wait."

He was disappointed as all hell, but he backed right off. "What's wrong, baby? You want to stop?"

"Boy, do I not want to stop. But we can't be here. Garrett's out front."

*Shit*. Garrett. He'd completely forgotten about Garrett, and here he was suddenly working very hard to get his little sister all kinds of naked and sweaty. That might tax a friendship just a bit. *Okay, think*.

“Where, then?” he asked.

“Your place?”

No, not his place. If this was going to work, he had to keep Frank clear of his Sons life. He had to minimize the ways they could be seen as connected. She couldn't be at his house, certainly not to stay over. She couldn't be seen at the clubhouse. “My place won't work. Your place?” He knew there might be a landmine, considering the last time he'd been over there, but they didn't have a lot of options, and he didn't want to lose this momentum they had here.

She was quiet for a bit and they were both still, her legs linked around him, his hand under her skirt, on her ass. They were panting. “Okay. My place.” She sounded reluctant. Landmine. He'd be careful.

He kissed her and sat back. He helped her sit up and straightened her skirt a little. Then he stood and offered her his hand. She took it and stood, and he leaned down and kissed her again, his arm snaking around her waist to hold her tight against him.

“I'll meet you over there?” he asked, brushing a few stray tendrils from her forehead.

She regarded him seriously for a moment. “If you bail on me, I will fuck you up the ass with your own dick, understand?”

This was a family that enjoyed a powerful image. It was also totally cute, since he was more than twice her size. He raised his eyebrows at her and chuckled. “As fun as that sounds, it's not gonna happen. I will be there. I promise. I'll be right behind you the whole way. And I am going to love you all damn night. For starters.”

## CHAPTER 8:

“Fade into You,” Mazzy Star

(“I-love-you-let’s-work-this-out-and-be-happy” songs don’t really exist in the punk world, so the song selections get a little singer-songwriter-y—okay, a lot singer-songwriter-y—right about now.)

Juice was true to his word; he stayed right behind her the whole drive to her apartment, and he was off his bike before she’d gotten out of Elwood. Frank wished there’d been a *little* distance between them, because she would have liked a minute to do something with the apartment. Well. This would be interesting. Her brain spun, trying to figure out what to say when she let him in.

He was on her as soon as she closed the driver’s door, coming up behind her to wrap his arms around her waist and press his mouth to her neck. She closed her eyes and enjoyed it. He kissed her cheek, then whispered, “Are you on anything? Do I need to have something?”

She wrinkled her brow, trying to figure out what he—oh. No, she wasn’t on anything. Hadn’t been any reason to be on anything. If he had to go get condoms, that would give her time to set things to rights, at least a little. She turned her head toward him. “I’m not, sorry.”

He gave her a squeeze. “No problem. Hold up a sec.” He let her go and trotted over to his bike. He unlocked a saddlebag and pulled out a box of Trojans. She watched as he considered bringing the whole box, thought better of it, opened it and pulled two condoms out, started to put the box back, then pulled it back out and got a third, then put the box back and locked the saddlebag.

She smirked at him. Apparently, he had very big plans for the night. Also: “You keep condoms in your bike?”

He gave her a brilliant, wide smile. Man, he had a great smile. “Hey, baby, I was a Boy Scout.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever, doofus. Come on.”

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the foot of the steps. She squirmed, not willing to see if he was dumb enough to try to carry her up those narrow stairs, and he put her down. She didn’t really want to end up in a heap at the bottom because he was trying to be all romantic or whatever. She climbed up on her own power, Juice right behind her.

When she put her key in the lock, she paused before she turned it. She looked at him. She opened her mouth to say something and then realized that she didn’t have any words queued up. Just the thought that there should be some. But nope.

He cocked his head. “What?”

“Nothing. Um, just—” Nope. No words. She sighed and gave her head a little shake. “Okay, then.” She unlocked the door and they went in.

Right then, on total impulse, Frank decided that the strongest, least exhausting play here was to just be completely honest and deal with whatever. She flipped the switch that activated the overhead track lights that ran throughout the room. Suddenly, it was bright as daylight. Smeagol yowled and hightailed it into the bathroom.

“What the fuck? Frank, what the fuck? What happened?”

She didn't say anything at first. She let him take it in.

It looked like the place had been ransacked by a crazed midget. Which pretty well described exactly what happened. Paintings had been torn off the walls and destroyed. One of the little metal dining chairs was upended next to the futon, as if it had been thrown, which it had. Her ballet slippers were hanging from the ceiling fan that was suspended from the peaked ceiling. A couple of the big floor pillows had been disemboweled, and there was stuffing everywhere.

Those were some of the highlights. It was still like this now, weeks later, because she just hadn't given a flying fuck.

The painting she'd been working on that night was shredded on its stretcher, and there were big brown blotches all over the stretcher and the tattered canvas. There were brown blotches elsewhere around the place, too. She wondered if he'd notice that. A conversation about that was probably going to happen one way or another, considering the reason he was here.

Juice turned to look at her, his mouth open. “What happened here?”

She shrugged. “LSD happened. You happened.”

He closed his mouth and put his hands around her arms. “You did this? After I left?”

She nodded. “My trip took a little detour.”

She saw his eyes well up and she straightened her spine. This was a no tear zone, dammit. “Oh Jesus, Frank. I'm such a moron. I never even thought about leaving you alone on acid. Until right now, I never thought about that. Fuck, I'm sorry. Look at your paintings! Fuck!”

Then he saw the one she'd painted that night. He walked over to it, and she took a breath and toughened up. Deal with whatever. That was the play. Always forward.

He picked it up, running the shreds through his fingers. “God, this was so beautiful.” He flicked his thumb across one of the brown blotches. He turned back to her. “Frank, this is blood.”

*Okay.* She walked over and pulled the blinds on the windows facing the Bendersons' house. They didn't need to see any of tonight's festivities, whatever they turned out to be. She turned to face Juice. She closed her eyes and took a breath. This was hard. *Okay. Deal with whatever.*

She bent down and unlaced her Docs. She kicked them off. She reached under her skirt and pulled her fishnets down and off.

Juice took a step toward her. “Frank . . .”

“Shut up. Wait.” She pulled her t-shirt out of her skirt, so that it hung down around her hips. Then she slid out of her skirt. *And here we go.* She pulled her t-shirt off; she was left standing in front of Juice in nothing but a cream-colored bra and a black thong.

Angry, jagged, dark pink lines crisscrossed her belly.

Juice gasped and strode to her, dropping to his knees. He whispered, “Oh, baby, what did you do?”

She closed her eyes. It was hard to have him so close. She felt his hands on her. She felt his mouth on her. *Okay.* Completely honest, right? “I was trying to get your kiss off me.” He took his mouth away. “You kissed me there right before you left, and I was trying to get rid of it. It was like it burned, and I had to make it stop.”

He pressed his forehead to her for a second. “Oh, Frank. God.” Then he ran his fingers over the raised marks. “You did this with your hands?”

She swallowed. “No. A palette knife.” At least it had been a clean palette knife, from the desk and not from the easel. And its edge had been too dull to go deep enough to do any truly serious damage. Just enough to make a big mess. When she’d come back to herself, she’d been able to clean herself up and not make a fuss.

She took a breath and looked down, saw him caressing her, his expression pained. God, those scars were so ugly. “I’m sorry.”

He looked sharply up at her. “Sorry about *what?*”

“I made me look so gross.”

He stood up and took her face in his hands. “You’re beautiful. And *I’m* sorry. Baby, *I’m so sorry.*” He kissed her. She didn’t want to dwell on this. She wanted to move on, if he would. Forward. Always. She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth, inviting him in. He moaned and squeezed her tighter to him.

He pulled out of their kiss and pressed his mouth to her cheekbone, over the rings in her eyebrow, across her forehead. She unzipped his hoodie and clutched his t-shirt in both hands.

He set her back a bit, putting a couple of inches between them. She looked up to see concern in his eyes. “Frank, are you sure you want this? Even after I did all *this* to you?”

She had the same question. “Are you sure you still want me—like really want me, not just want to bone me—after all this?”

He smiled his amazing smile at her and brushed loose strands out of her eyes. “Absolutely. I love you. I’m not going anywhere, as long as you want me around.”

“I’m a lot of work.”

His smile only got bigger. “Baby, you think I don’t know that? Getting you was a fucking Ironman competition. You’re worth the effort. Besides, I’m not so easy myself. My life is . . . complicated. You up for that?”

“You might not know this, but I’m pretty hardcore. I can handle it.”

“Not long ago, you weren’t so sure.”

She pushed him backwards toward the futon. “I’m sure now.”

She kept pushing until his calves hit the frame, and then she pushed him again to make him sit. She reached around to undo her bra, and he pulled off his hoodie, kutte, and t-shirt and took off his boots and socks. She pulled the band out of her hair and let it fall loose around her shoulders and down her back.

He scooted back on the futon as she climbed over him, straddling him. She could feel his hard cock against her core, and she wiggled and pressed down until she could feel him throb under her.

He gasped and pushed his hips up. “Ah, fuck, Frank. You’re gonna drive me crazy.”

She leaned down, her chest against his, and whispered in his ear. “Crazy’s a great place. You’ll like it.” She flexed her hips and bit his earlobe. His hands went around her hips and gripped hard.

She nibbled and licked at his neck, flicking her tongue stud over his twitching flesh. She moved to his chest and flicked over his nipples, delighting in his gasps and groans.

She didn’t have a lot of experience, but she had instincts, and it seemed like they were working okay. She sat back and ran her hands over the swells and ridges of his muscular chest and arms. “God, you have a fucking beautiful body, Juice.”

She grazed her nails up and down his chest and over his belly. He murmured, “Baby, baby, baby . . .”

She slid down his legs and kissed his belly, just above his waistband. She unfastened the top button of his jeans. Juice grabbed her arms and sat up. “Nope, nope, nope. Not that. Not yet.” He pulled her back onto his lap.

“Why not? I know what to do.” Well, more or less. She’d done it a couple of times. Not since the stud, though. But she *really* wanted Juice’s cock in her mouth. She was curious about how it would taste and feel. Actually, she was just curious as fuck about his cock in general.

“I have no doubt. And you have no idea how bad I want to be in your mouth. Jesus. The thought of that stud has been torturing me for months. But later. I’ll go way too fast if we do that first.”

He leaned in and kissed her pierced breast. Holy shit, that felt so good. She put her hands on his head and pushed him closer. He sucked her into his mouth. “God!” she gasped. She felt a heavy spasm between her legs, and she rubbed herself against him, moaning.

He pulled back and took the ring in his teeth. The sensation was indescribable—a little bit pinch, a little bit pull, a whole lot of so-damn-good. She cried out and arched way back, her head almost touching his legs.

When she came back up, he was looking at her with fire in his eyes. He held her close and rolled them over. He came up on his hands, keeping most of his weight off of her. But she wanted his weight; she felt cold with him so far away, and she put her hands on his back and pushed down. He came down to prop on his forearms, his lower body still clad in his jeans but pressed tight against hers. Much better. Though the jeans were going to have to go soon.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes fiery, his expression serious. She smiled up at him. “What?”

“I’m just amazed that we’re here. I’ve wanted this for a long time. I’m happy. That’s pretty amazing, too.”

She lifted her head and kissed him gently. When she lay back, he pushed himself down her body, pausing to suckle each breast. When he kissed her belly, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to stay relaxed. He kissed each raised mark tenderly. Then she felt his fingers tracing them. It was sweet, but it was nerve-wracking. “Don’t, Juice. Please.”

“Okay, baby. Okay.”

She felt his fingers pulling at her thong. She took another breath and lifted her hips so he could pull it down and off. Her eyes were still closed, but she opened them when Juice seemed to be too still.

“Something wrong?” He was staring at what the thong had been covering, and she was worried he wasn’t liking what he saw. She kept herself completely shaved, and she had a small tattoo low on the skin over her pubic bone, about an inch above her clit.

Juice looked up at her face. “God, no. The opposite of wrong. You’re beautiful. And so hot. Everywhere. You’re perfect. I’m going to want to ask about this tat, though, later. It’s a Gordian knot, isn’t it?”

She was impressed. “Yeah, it is.”

He grinned. "You're something else, girl. Let me see if I can't untangle you." He slid his hands under her ass and leaned down to put his mouth on her clit.

Just that kiss was almost too much for Frank to bear. She gasped and lifted her hips way off the bed. Juice slid his hands around from her ass to her hips to hold her steady. Then he flicked his tongue back and forth over her, and she cried out. "God God God!" He backed off and rubbed his nose along her bare folds. "You're like silk, baby. And so wet. Fuck."

They had all night to play. There was one thing she wanted right now. "In me. Be in me, Juice, please. I want you in me."

He looked up from between her legs and smiled that sexy damn smile. "You got it." He stood up and undid his jeans. He pulled them and his boxers down together, and Frank got her first look at his whole body.

He was totally ripped, every muscle hard and well defined. His cock was long and thick, and it curved down slightly. And he, too, was completely shaved. She'd never seen or imagined anything like it. She looked up, catching his eyes, and raised her eyebrows at him. He winked. He was a beautiful man.

He stood there and let her look her fill. She whispered, "You're perfect. You hardly look real."

"Oh, I'm real, alright." He grinned and reached down for his jeans, fishing a condom out of a pocket.

He got back on the futon, up on his knees between her legs. He looked at her, holding up the little foil packet. "Do you want to do the honors?" She sat up and took the packet. She tore it open and pulled the condom out, tossing the packet off to the side to land somewhere on the floor.

When she rolled the condom onto him, he hissed and tipped his head back, his hips rocking slightly. She lingered over the task, enjoying the feel of him in her hand, even encased in latex. Then he leaned down and pushed her back to the mattress, kissing her deeply on the way. He sat back on his heels and grabbed her knees, pushing her legs up. At first, he sat there, his hands caressing her inner thighs, sliding along her folds, his thumbs pushing inside her and along her core until she was whimpering and flexing and begging. "Please, Juice. Please."

He leaned over her again, propped on one hand, and held himself against her core. Impatient, she surged up herself and pushed him in part way, then he released himself and put his hand under her ass and pushed in fully. She arched her back and moaned as he filled her. *Oh. My. God.*

He just held there, deep in her, at first, not moving. She opened her eyes to see him. His eyes were closed; he looked tense. She flexed her hips against him and gasped at the deeper penetration.

He moaned, his jaw flexing. He opened his eyes then and looked down at her. She flexed again. And he started to move, pumping steadily into her, his hand clutching her ass and holding her tight. The pressure between her legs started right away and grew and grew. She'd never felt anything like this. She wasn't a virgin, but she'd never had an orgasm except on her clit. What she was feeling now was nothing like that. This was deeper and wider, as if he were sliding against every nerve in her body.

Juice was grunting with every push, each grunt louder and longer than the one before it. Then his grunts became words. "Fuck, Frank. Fuck. You're so tight. Come on, baby. Come on."

Then he pulled out of her and flipped her over, so fast she didn't know what was happening until she was on her knees in front of him. He grabbed her hip and pushed into her again. And oh shit! The angle was totally different and even deeper, and she started to come on his second thrust. She cried out, "Fuck, yes!" and Juice pulled her up against his chest, moving his left hand between her legs, massaging her clit. His right hand went to her left breast and squeezed and rolled her nipple behind the ring. She was bucking on him in a frenzy. It all felt so unbelievably good and new and she would totally have been fucking everything with a dick if she'd known it could be like this and he was pushing even deeper into her, his hand moving hard and fast on her clit until—the world just exploded. She arched back against his chest and threw her hands around his neck and keened as her whole body spasmed. Then Juice pushed her forward and grabbed her hips in his hands and slammed into her several times until he held, deep in her, yelling "God! God!" And then they collapsed in a heap on the futon, Juice careful even now to keep most of his weight off her.

Frank was panting and dazed. She felt almost stoned. It was like a new world had opened up to her. She rolled over to face Juice, his leg still resting over both of hers. He looked pretty dazed himself, but he smiled at her and brushed her hair back from her face. "You okay, baby?"

"Can we go again?"

He laughed hard at that. "Gimme a few minutes to regroup, then we'll go again. We'll go as many times as you want. I can always go downstairs and get the box. Boy Scout, remember."

## CHAPTER 9:

“Do You Wanna Touch Me?” Joan Jett

Lying on his back on her futon, Frank’s legs draped over his, both of them sweaty and panting, wiped the hell out, Juice could not believe how much had changed in a few short hours. He had her; that was pretty damn clear. She was all in. It changed his whole life—or at least his outlook on it. He needed to make a trip out to his bike. He grinned.

His eye caught her ballet shoes dangling from the fan, and his grin faltered a bit. He couldn’t believe he’d left her to do this. He couldn’t believe she’d forgiven him. She’d torn herself up!

He rolled on his side to face her, his head propped on his hand. She was lying quietly, still panting a little, her eyes closed and a sweet, relaxed smile on her face. Totally unguarded. The sight of her like this made his heart ache a little. He put his hand on her scarred belly, and she opened her eyes and turned her head to look at him. She didn’t say anything.

He leaned in and kissed her lightly. “How you feeling, baby?”

“Fucking awesome. Is that what it’s always like?”

*What?* He lifted his head off his hand and looked hard at her. Not a question he was expecting. A question a virgin would ask. Oh, holy Christ, *now* what had he done? She hadn’t bled. He hadn’t felt any resistance. She hadn’t said anything. And she damn well didn’t act like someone who didn’t know what she was doing. *Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.* “Don’t you know? Frank, you weren’t—”

She cut him off. “No! No, sorry. Not what I meant. Just—fuck. Okay. I had a boyfriend in high school. We did it. Pretty often, I guess. But he dumped me when I was a senior and, well, no guy since then. Nobody interesting enough. And the boyfriend—not anything at all like what’s been happening here. In fact, I wasn’t sure what the big deal was. He never made me come. He never tried all that hard, I don’t think. We were done when he was done, and he was done pretty fast.”

“You never had an orgasm until tonight??” Juice was feeling equal parts proud and overwhelmed.

“I get off. But it’s way different.” She squirmed, squinching her face up a little. “Can we stop talking about this now?”

“Sure, baby. Sorry.” He grinned and brushed her nose with his finger. “But, you know, I’m glad I can be of service.”

She laughed and punched his arm. “Cocky asshole.”

“Can I ask you something else?” He rested his head back on his hand.

“As long as it’s not about my orgasms.”

“The last time I was here was weeks ago. Why does your place still look like this?”

She shrugged. “Wasn’t really in a give-a-fuck place. After a while I barely even saw the mess. Smeagol kinda likes it, I think.”

“Smeagol?”

“My cat. He hates people even more than I do. He’s hiding, but he’ll be out when he’s hungry.”

Juice ran his hand over her belly. It was practically hollow. He looked over her body and really noticed: How high her hipbones stood up. The deep valleys between her ribs. The sharpness of her collarbone and cheekbones. The way her arms got skinnier above the elbows. Not healthy. Not acceptable.

He sat up. “Okay. We have work to do.” He reached over the side of the futon and grabbed his jeans, digging for his phone. He flipped it open and dialed.

Frank sat up, too, and pulled the sheet up over her breasts. “What are you talking about? Who are you calling?”

“Gina’s. We’re ordering a pizza. Extra cheese. And cheesy garlic bread. Some mozzarella sticks. Do you have beer?”

She nodded. “Hoping for a heart attack tonight?”

“We are putting some meat on your bones starting right now—yeah, I want to make a delivery order.”

He ordered everything he’d said he would, plus the salad that Frank insisted on. Then he shut the phone and said, “Okay, next. I’m going to run down to my bike for reinforcements”—he winked—“and then you and I are going to make a dent in this mess.”

She looked at him like he was crazy, but then she smiled and got out of bed. She grabbed his t-shirt and pulled it over her head. Oh, he liked that. She swam in it, but it was still sexy as hell. He fished his boxers out of his jeans and dropped them on the futon, then pulled his jeans on. “I’ll be right back, baby.” He headed for the door.

“Juice!”

He turned. “I *will* be right back, Frank.”

She smiled. It was a good smile. Easy. Trusting. “I know. I just need to tell you something, and I don’t want to forget. Garrett doesn’t know anything about any of this”—she gestured around the room—“or about what I did to myself. He can never know. This is just between you and me. Okay?”

That explained a lot. No way Garrett would have helped him if he'd known this part. If he'd been in Garrett's shoes and had known about this, he would have dismembered the fucker who'd left his baby sister in such a state. Not an exaggeration.

He looked at this girl he loved and had hurt so much. "Okay. Just you and me."

"Thank you."

He nodded and went down to his Dyna.

OOO

He brought up the whole box. It had been a new one, so he was pretty sure he'd give out before the condoms would. While they were waiting for their food, they got the furniture set back to rights, cleaned up the pillow guts, and stacked the destroyed paintings in a corner. Juice used the stool by her easel to get the ballet shoes down. The food arrived before they could get the stuff together to wash the blood off the walls and floor. It made his stomach clench to see how much there was to wash off.

She insisted on eating the salad first, but he also got her to eat a piece and a half of the pizza, a slice of bread, and a mozzarella stick. It took her awhile, but she ate. She finished a beer. Then she belched and giggled. Giggled. It was a great sound. "Oh my God, I'm so full!"

"Well, it should do you until breakfast, anyway." He stood up and kissed her on the top of her head, then started to collect the detritus of their meal. As he was standing at the counter, closing the food boxes, he felt her arms come around him. He stopped and closed his eyes as she pressed her soft cheek against his bare back and squeezed him tight.

She moved one arm back around, and he felt her fingers tracing the jagged scar on his back. "What happened here?" she asked.

He thought the answer might be the first test of Frank's commitment to being with him. He turned around, putting his arms around her as he went. He looked down into her vivid eyes. "I was stabbed, about two years ago. In jail."

Those eyes went wide. "Shit." She didn't say anything else. Then she nodded. "Okay." And she leaned in and kissed his chest.

At first, she just pressed sweet little kisses across his pecs. He put his hands on her shoulders and closed his eyes. Then her hands spread wide on his back, and she pushed him close as she flicked her studded tongue over each nipple. Then she bit down.

*God.* Juice let his head fall back as he pressed himself against her, his cock hard and throbbing. Oh, yeah. They were going again. And he knew what he wanted to do first. He brought his head back up and bent down to pick her up. She wrapped her arms and legs around him right away.

She fit perfectly there, wrapped around him, her mouth pressed hard to his. He could hold her like this forever.

Kissing her deeply, he walked them to the wall, pressing her against it. He brought his arms, one by one, inside her legs and put his hands on each cheek of her little ass. She pulled back and looked at him, curious. He grinned at her; then he pushed her up higher, getting his shoulders under her legs. The only thing she was wearing was his shirt. Not an impediment.

She saw what he'd done, where his face was, and whispered, "Oh, fuck me."

He chuckled. "Definitely. But first . . ." He brought her against his face and sucked on her clit, and this time she yelled it: "Oh, fuck me!"

He sucked and licked and nibbled. Her soft, bare skin felt like velvet against his face. He pressed his tongue into her, savoring the taste of her. She clutched at his head, writhing and flexing so hard that he had to spread his legs wide and hold her ass tight to keep them balanced, even with her up against the wall.

Her legs tensed over his shoulders. She started rubbing herself hard against his mouth. Her hands left his head, and he heard her palms hit the wall. "God! God! God! Oh, fuck, Juice! Yesyesyesyes!" And then she was quiet, her whole body rigid, her back arching so hard that she pushed them away from the wall. She relaxed so quickly and completely that he had to scramble to get them back against the wall so she wouldn't fall off his shoulders.

He brought her down into his arms and carried her to the futon. He lay down beside her and watched her breathing settle down.

Eventually she opened her eyes and looked at him, stunned. "What the fuck was that? Did you invent that?"

He laughed. "I doubt it. But it's not something I could do if you were much bigger."

"Well, it's fucking epic." She yawned and rolled into him, snuggling into his body.

He ran his hand down her back. "You getting sleepy, baby?"

"Mmm?"

He looked out the windows and realized that the sky was getting lighter. Almost dawn. He kissed her head and reached down to pull the covers over them. Then he settled her—asleep already—with her head on his chest. He went to sleep as the sun came up, his arms snug around her.

OOO

He woke up in bright sunlight, his jeans open, his cock hard, and Frank's hands around it, pulling him free of the denim. He took a deep breath to clear the sleep away. "Hey, baby. Whatcha doin'?"

She looked up and smiled. "You keep putting me off this, so I figured I should get started while you were sleeping and couldn't stop me."

She pulled on the waist of his jeans. He lifted his hips so she could pull them down, and he kicked them off the rest of the way. She ran her hands up and down his shaft and over the smooth, bare skin at its base and on his balls. He was so much more sensitive shaved—it's why he did it. He groaned and closed his eyes. *Jesus*, she felt good.

For a long time, until he pretty much though he would go out of his mind with the pleasure of her soft touch, she caressed him, touching him all over as if she were memorizing him with her hands. Every now and then she would wrap her hands around him and squeeze a little, and his cock would swell a little more. She kept this up much longer, he was going to sprain something.

Then he felt her mouth on his tip, pressing a kiss. She licked him lightly in the same spot. When that stud moved over him, every nerve in his body sang out. "Oh Christ," he gasped.

"Hey," she whispered. He shook his head a little and opened his eyes to look at her. The smile she gave him was shy. "I've never done this with the piercing. I've only done it a couple of times in any case, and that was a long time ago. Plus, you're bigger. I won't get mad if you tell me I'm not good at it, or if you want me to stop. And I'm sorry in advance if I hurt you."

It was such a sweet, trusting thing to say. There didn't seem to be any shred of her tough shell left between them. He understood why she was so self-protected and reluctant to connect with people. When she let you in, she let you *in*. She laid herself bare and gave herself over completely. She hadn't said the words, but he was in no rush. She'd been showing him all night that she loved him.

He smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Don't worry, baby. You can learn on me. Consider me your practice dummy."

She laughed and put him in her mouth. Juice's eyes rolled back in his head.

Her instincts were *good*. She kept her teeth clear, except that every now and then she'd intentionally graze his tip with them, and that was *fantastic*. She sucked just enough and used her hands, squeezing just right, to fill in the space between his base and what she could fit in her mouth. And, oh, sweet baby Jesus in the manger, her tongue. He had to back her off a couple of times, whispering "easy, baby, easy," when she'd drag the stud over the underside of his head, or across his balls, just a little too hard. But otherwise, that stud, and the sensation of her tongue curling and flexing around him, was just about the best thing he'd ever felt. He'd propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch her, and his head kept dropping back.

Some of his attention was focused on her inexperience, staying alert so that he didn't react too strongly if she did hurt him, and, anyway, he'd already come three times in the past few hours, so it took him longer than it otherwise would, considering how unbelievably fucking good she felt, before he felt his orgasm building. But when it was there, it was moving fast.

"Frank, wait!" She pulled back, and he could tell that she was afraid she'd hurt him. He was so close he thought he might go right now, when she wasn't even touching him. "I'm ready to go, baby. Use your hands, okay?"

"But I want to use my mouth. It's okay—I want it." He gave up and dropped flat onto the mattress with a groan. She put her mouth back on him and sucked him in. *Jesus*. He went off right away. "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Fuck, yeah—ah, *fuck!*"

When he was still again, she moved up his body to lie with her cheek on his chest. He was panting and dizzy. He put his hand on her head and ran his fingers through her hair. "You, my girl, are a natural."

"That was okay?"

"Oh, yeah. That was excellent."

"Why'd you try to back me off?"

He tipped his head down to see as much of her face as he could in this position. When he did, she tipped hers up. "Most girls don't like it. I wanted you to like what you were doing," he asked.

"Well, I liked it a lot. I've been swallowing for 22 years, you know. I'm a very good swallower."

He rolled and leaned over her. "Oh, no doubt. An expert, even." He kissed her.

The prepay went off, and he pulled back, dropping his forehead to her chest for a second, feeling something like despair. "I have to get that, baby; sorry." He got up and hunted it up—it had slid under the futon at some point. He got his hands on it while it was still ringing. He opened it without checking the screen. "Yeah!" He was pissed, and it showed.

Jax said, "Juice. We need you at the clubhouse ASAP. Got a hot job for you."

He closed his eyes and bit his tongue on the string of expletives that rose up in his throat. "Got it. I'll be there in 30."

"Make it 15." Jax hung up.

Juice closed the phone and dropped it on the pile that was his jeans. He sat down on the futon. Frank was sitting up, her legs folded under her. He traced the side of her face with his fingers and brushed her hair back over her shoulder, drawing his hand down the intricate ink on her arm.

“You’re leaving.” It was a statement.

“Sorry, baby. I have to go. Like, now.”

She sighed heavily. “I’m going to see you again, right?”

It felt like they were losing some ground here. “Frank, come on! Of course you are. I’ll come by tonight if I can. If you want me to.”

She studied him. “Okay.” She got out of bed, pulled his t-shirt off, and tossed it to him. She went to the bathroom. He watched her go, unsatisfied by that exchange. But he really did need to get moving, so he collected his clothes and got dressed. He could smell her—them—all over him. He was kinda glad he didn’t have time for a shower.

When Frank came out of the bathroom, she busied herself at the kitchenette. She walked up to him as he was pulling his kutte on. She put her hand on his arm. He stopped and turned to her, wrapping his hands around her tiny waist. She was still naked, her long, soft, currently very blonde hair lying over her shoulder and curling over one pert breast.

She held up a key. “Here. Come when you can.” She looked into his eyes, searching. In a small voice she said, “Please don’t make me sorry.”

He knew that key was a lot more than just a way into her apartment. He fought down the lump in his throat and put his hand on her cheek. “I love you, Frank. Now that I have you, I’m keeping you. I’ll be back.” He took the key from her. “Thank you for this. I’ll keep it safe.”

## CHAPTER 10:

“Old Friend,” Rancid

“Try,” P!nk

Frank walked down the faculty hall of the art building, on her way to a meeting with Andre. He'd given her an A in Advanced Life Drawing, even though she hadn't attended the last couple of weeks of class or turned in her final project. She'd tried to accept the grade gladly and not look down the throat of that gift horse, but it was driving her crazy. So, here she was, a few weeks into the spring semester, heading to what would probably be a very uncomfortable discussion. One that might kill her graduation in May, because she didn't want an A she hadn't earned.

His door was ajar. She knocked, telling herself not to provoke him, to have a civil, adult discussion with the asshole.

“Enter,” he said from the other side of the door. Such a cliché. She pushed the door open and stepped in.

“Ah, Miss Duvall. Yes. Please, have a seat.” He gestured at a chair in front of his desk. “I understand you would like to discuss your grade. Were you not satisfied?”

She sat up straight and met his eyes. She reminded herself to be civil and adult. “I just don't understand it. I missed two weeks of class and didn't turn in a project worth 20% of my grade. I'm not sure how I earned an A.”

He nodded. “Yes. I was quite disappointed not to see a final portfolio from you. I must say, though, it is highly unusual for a student to protest a grade because it's too high.”

“I don't want a grade I didn't earn, Andre—good or bad.”

“Would you say that I am the final arbiter of the grade students earn in my class?”

Well, yeah. Duh. What's your point, asshole? *Don't get snotty.* “Yes.”

“Well, then. I assessed your work in Advanced Life Drawing to be of the highest caliber and worthy of an excellent grade. Hence, A.”

“I threw a drawing at you.”

He nodded. “Yes, you certainly did. And you broke an easel. You also called me, if I recall correctly, a ‘self-important, flaccid prick,’ and told me to ‘blow’ myself.”

Yep, his recall was just fine. Frank kept her head up, held his gaze. She didn't say anything.

He cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. “Let me ask you something, Miss Duvall. What would you say is the sole crucial element of any piece of art?”

She was quiet for a moment, considering. She knew her own answer, but she needed to check the perimeter of the question, looking for a trap. This Andre wasn't much like the Andre preying on students in the art studio, but still. Finally, she just gave him her answer. "Emotion."

He smiled broadly. "Precisely." He leaned forward again. "Every semester, in every class, I stalk around the studio persecuting students. I'm a terrible bully. Within a week or two, I know every student's weakness, the thing I can attack to really make them sting. And every semester, in every class, every year, with very rare exceptions, students just take it, like sad little sheep."

"It's quite frustrating, actually. Students today are very difficult to provoke. They cower at authority. An artist does *not* cower. An artist is provoked. Easily and often. An artist provokes. An artist *rebels*. Getting a faceful of your dreadful charcoal was the highlight of my semester, Miss Duvall. It was the highlight of my year."

Frank was grinning; she couldn't help it. And Andre wasn't done.

"Your technique is excellent. You understand craft. You understand theory. Your eye is keen. But I might say as much about many students who get to this point in their degree. None of that makes an artist. It might make a designer, but not an artist. None of that matters a whit to art if emotion—*need, commitment*—isn't there. And emotion compensates for many technical failings."

He paused, then winked at her. Andre *winked* at her. "You, Miss Duvall, are an artist. I'm honored to have taught you anything. Take the A you deserve. Go out into the wide world. Make your mark." He stood up and held out his hand. "Please invite me to your first solo showing. I would like to own a piece of yours someday." He winked *again*. "Preferably before they become too pricey. I am only a professor, after all."

Frank left his office in an elated daze.

OOO

She was crossing campus later that afternoon, still flying on her post-Andre high, on the way to her car after her last class, thinking of Juice. He'd been with her for at least a little while almost every day for the past few weeks. He slept over a lot, even though sometimes he came in really late, after she was asleep. She kinda loved waking up as he slid in next to her and took her in his arms. She loved even more not going back to sleep right away.

She didn't seem to be able to get enough of his body and the things he could do to hers.

He'd come to her bruised and bloody once, and that freaked her out, but he wouldn't talk about it. Sons stuff, obviously. He wouldn't tell her almost anything about that part of his life. Most of his life, in other words. He wouldn't bring her to his house. He told her that he wanted to keep his life with her separate from his life with the Sons, that it was the only way to keep her safe. She believed him, and she hadn't fought him on it. But she worried about him all the time he was away from her. And she was getting frustrated by all the things he wouldn't talk about.

She huffed and shook those thoughts away. She was happy. She hadn't said the words out loud yet—they seemed stuck in her throat somehow—but she really loved him. She loved spending time with him, playing video games naked on her futon, watching movies or TV, or hanging out in the shop with Garrett. And fucking. A lot. All sorts of ways. It was crazy the things she hadn't known about sex. Seriously.

She was closing the shop on her own tonight. Juice was never thrilled when she closed alone, and he'd been making a point to be with her when she did. She should have been irritated that he was practically babysitting her, but she was happy to have him around. So she was thinking about hanging out in the shop with him, maybe getting busy in the back after they locked up.

She looked up and was shocked to see him across the quad, walking toward her. She smiled and sped up. He was walking with Dr. Accardo, and they were chatting amiably. Just as she was about to greet him, he saw her, and the look on his face killed her greeting and her smile. He looked dismayed. Because he'd seen her. *What the fuck?*

She stopped on the sidewalk, at a loss. As they approached her, Dr. Accardo smiled and said, "Hey, Frank—how are ya?" Juice said nothing.

Frank retained enough composure to reply, "Hi, Professor. I'm fine," as they passed her.

She turned and watched them walk on. Juice turned his head back to look at her. She couldn't read his expression, but she heard Dr. Accardo say, "Eyes front, bucko. What did I tell you? No little college girls for you." And then Juice turned away, and they were too far away for her to hear more.

She just stood there, her eyes prickling. She blinked viciously. *No fucking tears, bitch. No fucking tears.*

OOO

It was almost three hours before he called her. She'd just gotten to the shop and was still in the back. Her first thought was to ignore it, but she didn't want to be one of those awful, passive-aggressive "if you don't know why I'm mad, I'm not going to tell you" women. So she answered.

"What do you want, asshole?" Passive wasn't cool. No problem with aggressive, though.

"Frank, I'll explain. But I can't now. I only have a second. I can't get to the shop tonight. I just talked to Garrett; he's going to stay with you. I'll get to you as soon as I can. I promise. I love you."

She pressed "end." He was lucky she'd just disconnected; she was all set to tell him to fuck off, but then he said he loved her and had tied her tongue.

She went out front. Garrett was at the desk, filing comics in the customer save files. “Hey, sissy. I’m hanging around tonight.”

“Fuck you, Garry. You don’t need to babysit me. I closed the shop by myself all the time before Juice decided I was a helpless little bunny. And I know he called you. Get out. You need a life outside this musty hole. And I don’t need you.”

Garrett sighed. “You know, I’m standing here wondering which one of you will kick my ass harder—you if I stay, or him if I go. That sucks, sis.”

Yeah, it probably did. But she thought it sucked that Juice was getting between her and Garrett here. She put her hands on her hips and stared at him. “Well, before you start channeling Joe Strummer, make your choice, big brother.”

He shook his head and laughed ruefully. “Jesus. Okay, I’m going. I’m heading straight home—you call me if there’s anything weird at all, okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I’ll call.”

“Seriously, sissy. He sounded like there was some kind of problem. You call me.”

“I’ll call! Just get out of here, please!” He kissed her cheek as he passed her on his way to the back room.

OOO

Closing went uneventfully, as she’d known it would. It had been a quiet night all around, and that was a good thing, because she wasn’t in the mood to be friendly to strangers. Or friends. Or loved ones. She locked up, closed out, and went home. Feeling a small twinge of sisterly duty, she called and let Garrett know she was home.

When she’d closed her front door, she’d briefly wished she had a security chain or something to block Juice’s entrance. But that was passive-aggressive bullshit again.

She tried to have a normal night. She fed Smeagol. She poked at her current painting for a while. She made herself some dinner. Frank was not a cook, so she made a sandwich, feeling irritated as she packed in the calories, thinking about the way Juice had been monitoring how she ate. Now that she thought about it, he was doing a whole fucking lot of babysitting, and she’d been letting him get away with it. Well, fuck that. She tossed her food, mostly uneaten, down the disposal and ground it up. Then she sat down on the futon with *A Dance with Dragons*, planning to read until he showed up. She didn’t want to be sleeping when he got there.

OOO

She woke to Juice's fingers caressing her face, her book forgotten on the floor where it had dropped. At first, still mostly asleep, she turned happily into his touch. He smiled and murmured, "Hey, baby."

And then she remembered the day. She knocked his hand away. "Don't 'hey baby' me, asshole."

He sighed and sat down on the futon, lifting her legs to sit under them, his hands on her knees. She didn't want to be cozy with him, dammit. Did he think everything was just okay? That maybe she'd forgotten that he'd totally blown her off, walking right past her across campus with her hot history professor? She kicked his hands off and turned to sit up.

She wasn't jealous of Dr. Accardo, not that way. The professor was fully invested elsewhere. Frank saw the mountain man biker around her house all the time. He practically lived there. But Dr. Accardo was a part of Juice's life that he would not let Frank be a part of. And it was the biggest part of his life. It was *all* of his life, in fact, except for the thin slice he gave her, sitting here in her little apartment in the middle of the night. Of *that*, she was extremely jealous. Approaching crazy jealous.

Juice turned to face her. "I know you're mad, baby, but I want to explain. Will you listen?"

She wasn't much in the mood for listening. "Have you noticed how much time you spend having to *explain* the shit you do to me? Do you think that's a problem? Because I sure the fuck do."

He surprised her by standing up in a huff and stalking off toward the kitchenette. "You know what, Frank? I had a really shitty night. I'm tired and sore. I need a shower. I do not have the fucking energy for your attitude. What I had going on tonight is way bigger than your hurt feelings. If you don't want me here, say so, and I'll go home and get some damn sleep."

He'd shocked her speechless, at least momentarily. She sat there with her brain churning, trying to decide what she wanted to say. She didn't want him to leave. She wanted to have this out and move forward. But now there was a little voice suggesting that she was overreacting. She didn't know what had been going on with him. It sounded big, though. Maybe she needed to back off.

And then it occurred to her, a bright light of understanding. The snub on campus might well be a little thing in itself, once explained. But the big thing, the really good reason to be pissed, was all the *not knowing*. She didn't know why he'd walked past her. Dr. Accardo didn't know that Juice was her guy. Frank didn't know what had happened tonight. And whatever he was going to "explain," he wasn't going to give her any details.

What she was really pissed about was the anorexic little slice of his life he'd given her. But coming at him with her claws out was apparently not the best approach. Getting the hang of this relationship thing was hard.

She stood up and walked toward him, stopping about halfway. "I don't want you to leave. And I'm . . ."—she actually had trouble saying it, since she wasn't entirely sure she felt it—"sorry I came on so strong. I'm sorry you had a bad night, though I don't know what that means. I felt

really bad watching you walk past me today without a word, though. It hurt a lot. And it hurt more to see you with Dr. Accardo.”

“Frank, come on. I’m not with Lilli”—so that was her first name—“I’m with *you*. I was there on Sons business. Opie, her old man, needed me to keep watch over her today.”

“You blew me off. Kinda epically.”

He walked up and took her hands in his. She let him. She didn’t want this to be a breakup thing. She wanted to work through it. It would probably help if she stopped opening every argument with an attack. She’d have to work on that. Probably.

He said, “I know. Lilli doesn’t know I know you, and I want to keep it that way. I told you, I don’t want the club to know we’re together. I don’t want you associated with SAMCRO. I want to keep you away from all that. I want you safe.”

It had been her concern about the Sons that had kept them apart at first, so of course he was trying to keep her away from it. It was her fault, really. Or at least partly, anyway. He seemed to have adopted her reservations for his own, though, and made them even stronger.

“I get it, Juice. I do. But it hurt. Not because I thought you were banging her. I see her guy—Opie?”—he nodded—“at her house all the time. They’re very together. And I trust you.” They were standing in the middle of the room. “You want to sit?” He nodded and led her back to the futon.

Once they were settled side by side, she picked up where she’d left off. She had some stuff to lay out. Then she had some questions. “It hurt because I was closed out. Your whole life happens someplace you won’t allow me to be. I know I was freaked out about the Sons, and I know it got in the way of us. But the part that freaked me out wasn’t whatever shit you guys get up to. It was the chance of you not being around—and that chance is there whether you let me in your life or not. Having a fraction of you isn’t working for me. I’m an all-or-nothing chick. I want all of you. The Sons are a big part of you. So I want in.”

He was quiet for a long time, staring out the window. Long enough to make her worried. She felt like she needed to underline her seriousness, so she turned his head back so that he faced her. “What I’m saying here is that I *need* in or this—us—isn’t going to work. That’s the choice I’m asking you to make. If you let me in, then I have some questions. If you don’t, then you can leave the key on your way out.”

He practically leapt off the futon, and Frank’s heart sank into her stomach. Fuck, he was going to leave. *Okay. Deal with whatever. Always forward.* Blah fucking blah. Oh, shit! But she didn’t pull back what she’d said. She waited.

“Jesus, Frank. That’s a fucking awful ultimatum you just laid on me. Scare the shit out of you, put you in *danger*, or lose you. Christ, probably lose you *because* I scare the shit out of you and

put you in danger. That sucks. *Fuck* you.” He walked over to the wall of windows and pressed his forehead to the glass. “I so did not need this shit tonight.”

Frank was pretty sure this was as pissed as he’d ever been at her. But she sat there and waited. Ultimatums were shitty. No question. But she needed this one. She couldn’t do this sideline thing. It made her feel like something he needed to hide—because she was something he was hiding. So she waited for him to make his choice.

He leaned against the window for the longest time. She was feeling restless and anxious, but she was determined to wait him out.

Finally, he turned to face her. She couldn’t read his expression, except to see very clearly that he was upset. He stayed at the windows, his arms crossed. He said, low and without enthusiasm, “Ask your questions.”

She needed to make sure she understood. “Are you saying you’ve made your choice?”

His voice was still flat. “Yes. Ask.”

Her head swam with relief. “Will you take me to the clubhouse? Can I meet the people there?”

He didn’t answer right away. He just looked at her. Then he said, still without any discernable emotion in his voice, “You should ask a different question first. You should ask what happened tonight.”

She had that one queued up anyway. “Okay, what happened tonight?”

He sighed. He looked defeated. She felt guilty, but she held her ground. In that flat, tired voice, he said, “I’m about to give you a lot of power over me and my club. Understand that. And understand that we are people who will *kill* anyone who tries to hurt us. That’s not an exaggeration, Frank. Tell anyone outside the club—and that includes Garrett—what I’m about to tell you, and you risk a *lot*. You risk everything. I won’t be able to protect you. You want in, that’s the deal. You keep our secrets. No matter what. Understand?”

That was some pretty heavy shit to deal with, but okay. She’d asked. So she nodded and waited for him to go on.

“Say the words, Frank. Do you understand?”

Somehow, that made everything even scarier, but she wanted Juice, so she wanted in. “I understand.”

He nodded, once, in acknowledgement. “Tonight the club was attacked by another MC, one associated with a drug cartel that’s at war with the cartel we’re working with. Do you understand the kind of players I’m talking about?” She nodded again, and he continued. “They hit Sons who were out on a deal, and they hit the clubhouse, where we’d brought the families to keep them

safe while that deal was going down. That's why I was with Lilli. We were on high alert because the same cartel had burned a Son's house to the ground on Christmas and killed his family. Women and children."

Frank's mouth was dry. This was a lot more than she'd imagined was happening. This hardly seemed like it could be real.

"They hit the clubhouse. Where we had the families. Women and children, again. I was one of the Sons there to protect them."

Frank closed her eyes and shook her head. This was too much. He stopped talking. When she opened her eyes again, he was just looking at her. She asked, "Was anyone hurt?"

"One Son was hurt pretty bad. He's being taken care of at the clubhouse. Looks like he'll be okay. No innocents were hurt. We killed all of the members of the other club. Shot them all down—fourteen men. And I don't regret it *at all*. I'd do it again, harder, if I could. They attacked innocents. Their leader threatened to rape Lilli with a sniper rifle."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Frank. We deal guns. We transport cocaine. When we have to, we kill. It brings us up against people like that all the time. That's 'the shit we get up to' at SAMCRO. That's the life you're so hot to get in on. Any other questions?"

She was scrambling to make sense of all this, to make the biker who lived a life like that fit with the sweet, adorable geek who skanked around the shop with her after closing. It didn't make sense. So, yeah, she had other questions.

"Is this the life you *want*?"

He turned and looked out the window. "No. It's not. The drugs and the cartel—that's new, and it's way over our heads. The blood and death makes me sick. None of us want it. We didn't know what we were getting into. But we're in it, and if there's a way out, we haven't found it."

"Can't you leave?" She almost whispered it.

"Not how it works. And I don't want to. I love that club, those guys. I would do anything for them." His voice broke, and he was quiet for awhile. When he spoke again, his voice was rough. "They're my family, Frank. I'm in this with them. If you make *that* a fucking ultimatum, you'll lose." He turned back and slid down to sit on the floor, his head in his hands. "What else?"

She got up and went to him, folding herself up on the floor next to him. He was right—he'd scared the shit out of her, and her brain was rioting. She had only one clear thought. She loved him. This had been his life the whole time he'd been in her life; she just hadn't known it. Her knowing now didn't change anything they'd had together. She was in. She was terrified, but she was in. She put her hands on his arm.

He put his hands down and looked at her. "I'm tired, Frank. If you have other questions, ask."

"When can I meet your family?"

He cocked his head and took in a long, slow breath. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm in." Then she made a decision and finally said what she felt. "I love you." She'd never spoken those words to anyone but family before.

It was clear on his face that he had been waiting and wanting to hear them. He smiled—it was a sad, tired smile, not even a tenth the wattage of the smile she was used to—and pressed his lips to her forehead, resting there.

"Thank you, baby." He dropped his head to her shoulder. Frank felt his tears. She pulled him close.

They sat on the floor together for a long while. Then Juice got up wearily and took a shower while Frank set the bed up. When he came out, they climbed in and went to sleep, holding each other tight.

For the first time, Smeagol got up on the bed with them. Finding the pillows full, he curled up at the foot of the mattress.

## CHAPTER 11:

“We’re a Happy Family,” The Ramones  
“Pony,” Far

Juice pulled into the Teller-Morrow lot, Frank riding behind him. He still didn’t think bringing her all the way into his life was a good idea, but once he’d gotten some sleep and calmed down after their conversation last week, he understood why she needed to be part of this. The danger she was in now, though—no way she really understood how much. But other Sons had girlfriends and old ladies—and kids! They made it work.

Or they didn’t. Opie’s first wife had been brutally killed in a club-related drive-by a couple of years ago, and he’d sent his kids away to live with their grandma in SoCal after that. But he had a new old lady now, Lilli, and they were getting married. So even Ope was still willing to bring a woman he loved into the life.

The risk Juice brought to Frank was doubled, at least, because he was on a high wire between the club and the Feds. At least twice a month he was getting dragged in, supposedly for a “piss test,” but really so they could fuck with him. He’d been holding them off with little bits of old or harmless information, but he knew that wasn’t going to work much longer. They were getting impatient. They wanted more. He didn’t know what he would do when they finally insisted they get it. He was shocked they’d held off this long.

The secret and the stress were killing him. He wished he could at least tell Frank, but he drew the line at putting her in the middle of that fucking mess.

But he had to admit that a huge load had lifted from his shoulders when Frank had insisted he tell her about the Sons. He couldn’t tell her everything, no, but he could tell her a lot now, and it helped to have one place he could be where the weight of what he couldn’t say wasn’t bearing down on him so hard. God, though, he’d been furious when she’d forced his hand. He’d stood there thinking seriously about walking away. But he needed her in his life. Now that he had her, he was keeping her.

He’d felt disgusted with himself when he lectured her about secret-keeping, fully aware of his hypocrisy. But he couldn’t have her in a jam like he was in. He still needed to keep her safe—as safe as possible, anyway.

Despite the risk, he was glad to be able to be with her out in the open. He wanted people to know her. She was amazing, and he was proud to have her love. And it was *totally awesome* to be able to ride with her. He’d kept her off his Dyna because he didn’t want to be seen around town with her. But having her arms wrapped around him, feeling her thighs squeezed against him—it rocked.

So now he was bringing her to introduce her to the Sons family—his family. Gemma, the President’s old lady and the queen of the clubhouse, had organized one of her famous clubhouse potlucks. Juice had thought it would be a good time to bring Frank in, but now, as they got off his bike and she handed him her helmet, he was having second thoughts.

Clubhouse parties, even potluck dinners (which always turned into drunken blowouts eventually), could be a lot to deal with, and Frank wasn't exactly great with people. Maybe it would have been better to introduce her to a few people at a time, over time.

But he'd asked Gemma if he could bring Frank, and there was no turning back now. Now everybody knew that Juice had himself a girl. They'd been giving him shit for three days. He didn't really mind. But he was still nervous about how tonight would go.

She looked pretty nervous herself. She also looked smokin' hot and adorable, both at once. She was wearing a pair of skinny jeans (which she was starting to fill out again), cuffed up to show off her beloved blue Docs, and a Rocky Horror t-shirt. Her hair was black again, and she had it pulled back in her customary ponytail. She'd gone a little lighter on her makeup and was, of course, wearing her glasses. No one else around here looked much like her, but she'd still fit in just fine.

He'd given her a classic black leather motorcycle jacket when he'd picked her up tonight. It had been an impulse buy, but it seemed somehow an appropriate gesture to mark what was in some ways the beginning of something real between them. Not that the past month hadn't been real. Anyway, she'd loved it. It suited her little punk soul. And it looked fucking great on her.

He smiled and took her hand, pressing a kiss to it. "You ready, baby?"

She sighed and smiled back. "Sure. What the hell. Let's do it."

Chibs was sitting alone on a picnic table. He stood, a bit stiffly, when they walked up. It was Chibs who'd been hurt in the attack last week, shot in the chest.

"Hey, Chibs. How you feeling?"

"Juicy. I'm gettin' by." He was giving Frank a considered look-over. It went on a bit long.

Juice cleared his throat. "This is my girl, Frank. Frank, this is Chibs"

Frank met Chibs' look steadily, her eyebrows up a little. "Hey."

"Lovely to meet ya, lass. Will ya give me and your fella a mo?" Without waiting for her answer, the Scot put his hand firmly on Juice's shoulder and led him several feet away.

"Juicy. What're ya doin', lad?"

Juice was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Don't we have enough troubles around here? How old *is* the wee lass?"

Juice laughed hard. "Relax, dude. She's 22."

Chibs looked back at her. Juice did, too. She was sitting on the picnic table, her arms crossed and her foot swinging energetically. Uh-oh. He needed to get back there.

“22, yeah? You don’ say. Such a wee little thing. Sorry, then, brutha. About your business with ya.” He clapped Juice on the back and, wincing, gave him a push back to Frank.

She jumped off the table when he approached. “What the fuck was that?”

He smiled and grabbed her hand. “Chibs thought maybe I’d kidnapped you from a daycare. I told him not to worry—I’d promised to have you back for your 10pm feeding.”

She kicked the back of his knee. “Asshole.”

He stumbled but caught himself, laughing. “You know it, baby. C’mon. Time to meet the rest of the freaks.”

OOO

Dinner went great. Frank was actually charming—which, truly, Juice had not expected. He’d hoped for charming, but he’d expected prickly. After what he’d told her, he knew she was expecting to have dinner with a barbarian horde—the Huns, basically.

But she’d picked up the rhythm of the banter quickly and hadn’t really held back, and that was exactly the right approach for this crowd. The Sons met the Frank he’d met, the bright-eyed punk hottie with the saucy wit and the sailor’s mouth.

It helped, he thought, that Opie and Lilli were the first people they encountered in the clubhouse. He’d told Lilli ahead of time that Frank was his girl, and Opie’s old lady—who was incredibly awesome, and Juice loved her like a sister—welcomed her former student warmly. Frank was obviously glad to see her, but she was also most reserved with her. She had a little hero worship thing going for Lilli, Juice thought.

Bolstered by that warm greeting from Lilli, Frank met the rest of the Sons, all of whom were welcoming. The only person Frank seemed intimidated by was Clay, the President. But he had that effect on pretty much everybody upon first meeting. And for a good long while thereafter.

Lilli took her around to meet the women, especially Jax’s old lady, Tara, and, of course, Gemma. Juice watched that meeting from across the room. Gemma tended to be very suspicious of other women, and she didn’t try to hide it. But whether it was Frank’s small size or the fact that she had by then completely relaxed around this group, Gemma was very sweet, almost maternal, with her.

In fact, after dinner, as Gemma was managing the Crow Eaters cleaning up the tables, and Frank was sitting with Lilli and Tara, playing with Jax and Tara’s little boys, the queen of the clubhouse walked up behind Juice’s chair and ruffled his mohawk. She leaned down and said

into his ear, “I like her, Juice. She’s sweet and sassy. You keep hold of that one. I think she just might be old lady material.”

Juice turned and grinned up at her. It was all he could do. He’d lost the power of speech.

After Gemma walked away, the Sons, all sitting around with him, gave him piles of shit. Bobby, who was sitting closest to him and had heard every word Gemma had said, slapped him on the back and said, “Well, you’re done for, Juice, my brother. Better marry that little girl right quick. The Gemma seal of approval don’t come easy.”

Not that Juice hadn’t thought of it. But marriage wasn’t on the table, and he wasn’t about to put it there. She was only 22, for fuck’s sake. Juice just laughed and took the ribbing.

As with all Sons gatherings, within an hour of the meal ending, the booze was flowing. Opie and Lilli had gone off to her place, and Jax and Tara and their kids had headed home. The Crow Eaters somehow all at once seemed to lose half their clothes, and the music got loud.

Frank was not a big drinker. She stayed away from hard stuff, and she usually had a one-beer limit. Little as she was, she was a two-beer drunk, and she didn’t like the feeling of being drunk. Juice wasn’t so into the post-dinner festivities himself these days. So they sat for a while in one of the big leather chairs, Frank in his lap, smoking a little weed and watching the family dinner turn into a drunken bash. Frank seemed almost anthropologically interested.

She was running her fingers sensuously over his mohawk, and Juice was thinking of things he’d rather be doing. She’d finally gone on the Pill, and it was finally safe to be inside her without the sausage casing. He suddenly wondered why the *fuck* they were sitting in the clubhouse when they could be in bed—hers or his—skin to skin for the first time.

He brought her ear against his lips. “I’m sitting here thinking about how hard I want to fuck you. Let’s get outta here.”

She turned her head to meet his eyes, smiling. “I have a better idea.”

“Um, no such thing.”

“There’s a club in Sac. I used to go there a lot. Could be cool. Like a date or something.”

Hmm. Ride almost an hour each way to a club with a crowd of people, or spend the rest of the night in bed, inside his girl. Not exactly a tough call. He looked at her like she’d lost her mind. Because he was pretty sure she had.

She leaned in and flicked her tongue around his ear. His cock, which had already been paying attention, went on full alert. No way they were going anywhere but to a bed. She whispered, “We could go to my place first. I’d want to change, anyway. You could do me first, and then we could have a date. Win-win.”

He still would have much preferred doing her all night, but she was licking his neck now, that fucking stud running over his skin . . . and now her hand was on his crotch, squeezing him. She whispered, "Please?"

*Okay, okay!* "Your call, baby. But let's get movin'."

OOO

He had her up against the door to her apartment as soon as she'd closed it, his hand down her jeans, his fingers inside her and his palm pressed hard to her clit. His tongue was deep in her mouth, wrestling with hers. As worked up as he was in the clubhouse, the ride to her place was almost more than he could take. She'd had her hands all over him the whole ride. If she did that on the ride to Sacramento, he was sure to lay the bike down on the freeway.

She was scrabbling to get his hoodie and kutte off, gasping and moaning at his hand working her. Finally, she just gave up and went for his fly. He was using the hand that wasn't inside her to pull open her jeans. When he succeeded, he pulled his hand out of her and yanked her jeans down. But her boots! Fuck those boots! Fuck these skinny damn jeans!

She had him out and was stroking him, whimpering and pulling him closer to her. He couldn't think. But he couldn't get to her. Then she pushed on his chest, and he took a couple of steps backward, toward the futon. He took a breath. Okay, they'll slow down, then. But she surprised him by turning around and bending over, her palms flat on the door. *Oh, baby. Good girl.* He stepped up against her and ran his fingers up and down her core, caressing her. She was always so totally wet for him. He sank home, one hand on her hip, the other on her back.

He wanted to savor the feeling of finally being naked inside her. And Jesus Christ, she felt so good. But he was too worked up, and she pushed back hard against him right away, making him sink in fully and deeply. She cried out and clenched her muscles around him. They moved, Frank rocking against his rhythm, making the penetration harder and deeper with each of his thrusts. She was grunting. He was grunting. This was going to be fast. He just gave in and pounded hard into her until she screamed, and they came together.

Panting heavily, he leaned against the door, pressing Frank to it as well, still inside her, enjoying the sensation of her spasms settling down around him. After a couple of dizzy minutes, he pulled out and picked her up. He walked them to the futon and laid down with her.

"Jesus, Frank. Are you sure you want to go out?"

She rolled against him, still wearing her new leather jacket, her jeans still around her knees. "Yep. I want to go out with you. In public. Where people will see us together." She slid her hands into his open jeans, into the fly of his boxers, and fondled his balls. She knew full well how sensitive they were right now. He shivered at the pleasure and closed his eyes.

She stretched up and whispered in his ear. "I'll make you glad we went out. I promise."

“You win, baby. You win. Just . . . do that for a little longer, though, okay?”

After a few minutes, she actually got up, cleaned up, and changed clothes, so he dragged himself up and got cleaned up, too. She’d better make him glad. He was holding her to that promise.

He’d never seen Frank dress to go clubbing, so at least that was interesting. Until tonight, he’d had no idea that she would be interested in something so social. But she really got into the whole primping process, and by the time they left, she was wearing a tutu made out of black netting, bright pink leggings with black polka dots, and lace-up purple velvet sleeveless top that was just slightly more than a bustier. She dug out of the back of her closet a pair of battered black Docs he hadn’t seen before. She did her makeup with an extra-exotic flourish, and she piled on the bracelets. She left her glasses on the desk.

When she was done, she pulled her new jacket on and grinned at him. *Damn*, she was hot. She was his perfect girl. He thought again how well she’d fit in in New York. He’d like to take her there sometime.

When they left the apartment, he gave the futon a wistful look.

OOO

She behaved herself on the ride, and they got there in one piece. She’d directed them to a business/nightlife area of the downtown Capitol. He parked the bike off the street, and she led him down into a basement with an access off an alley. It wasn’t isolated or deserted; there were people milling about, all dressed of a style with Frank. He locked his hoodie and Frank’s jacket in his bike. He left his kutte on. He was not entirely comfortable so far from Charming and the MC, just him and Frank, and the kutte was his armor. Frank had hers; he had his. He’d risk the parole violation. He thought if that came up, he’d be dealing with bigger problems.

The fact that he was so on edge, when this scene had once been his scene, gave him some pause. The Sons had changed his life. They’d also changed him. These days he just always expected trouble. Of the bloody kind.

As they went down into the bowels of the building, he thought about the ass-kicking he’d get from the club if they knew he’d come out here in the middle of the night without backup. But Frank was positively bouncing with excitement, and he couldn’t deny her. Talk about whipped.

There was a huge bouncer sitting on a stool outside the doorway at the bottom of the steps. Dude hit 300, easy. His platinum mohawk had to be a foot tall, his eyebrows were shaved into stripes, and he had stretched lobes and a large safety pin through his nose. Nice. Old school. He was wearing the jumbo-size version of Frank’s new jacket.

When the beefy guy saw Frank, his mouth spread into an entirely incongruous goofy grin. “Frank! Little Frank! You’re back!”

Dude picked his girl up and squeezed her in a bear hug. Juice had his hackles up right away, but then Frank cried, “Hey, Toad! How ya doin’, pal?” Toad—the name was apt, Juice thought—put her down and said, “I’m good. We missed you around here.” He looked at Juice, took in the kutte, and nodded once, with a little cock of his head—extending an offer of truce and/or mutual respect. It was a gesture with a common understanding among people like Juice and Toad. It said: *I’m a tough guy; you’re a tough guy. Let’s just be chill.* Juice nodded back.

“This your guy?”

“Yep. Juice, Toad. Toad, Juice.” Toad held out his canned ham of a fist, and Juice shook it. Okay. First gate cleared.

“Go on in, Little Frank. You always have a free pass, sweets.”

“Thanks, man! Missed you!” She kissed the giant’s fleshy cheek. Who *was* this little social butterfly?

Before she went through the door, she turned back to Toad. “Hey, T—Desi around? She doing her thing?”

“You know it. In her throne room, same’s always.”

Frank nodded and grabbed Juice’s hand, leading him in.

The club was crowded, loud, and dark, lit with crimson light. Juice would never have guessed there were this many punkers in the whole of the Central Valley. He understood right away why Frank liked it. There was a huge dance floor. The music was amazing, being spun by a DJ in a cage at the back of the room. The crowd was so big and the music so loud that the space became intimate.

Frank led him, winding through the masses, to a small bar, three punkers deep. She dropped his hand and essentially crawled under everyone until she reached the bar, then pushed herself to sit on it. The barkeep, a bald dude in leathers, saw her, and another incongruously friendly grin broke out. They did a fist bump and a cheek kiss. They talked briefly, mouth to ear, back and forth, and she came away with two beers.

She got back to him and handed him a beer, smiling hugely. He drained his at once—nerves. She took a couple of swallows of hers and then set it on a nearby hightop. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a nicely distracting kiss. Again he thought about what they could be doing right now if they’d stayed home. He was going to be looking for her to pay up on her promise pretty soon.

She pulled his head down so she could speak into his ear. “Dance with me.”

That he could do. She led him onto the floor, deeper into the crowd. The deej was spinning an industrial sound with a heavy beat. Frank went unabashedly into it right away, bouncing and

banging and thrusting on the beat, tossing her head back and forth, her breasts bouncing sweetly in her skimpy top. Fuck, it was sexy.

His nerves were on a razor's edge, though. She was in constant danger of being swallowed up in the surging crowd. He had to work to stay with her. Then she pressed right up on him, rubbing all over him as she danced, and he realized the genius of that plan. He put his arms around her and matched his moves to hers so that they were basically dry humping to the beat. Yeah, that worked. Couldn't lose her this way.

But then a gorgeous, statuesque woman, maybe in her early 40s, with spiky magenta hair and an elaborate, thorny vine inked along the side of her face, pressed in behind Frank and turned her around. Juice stopped moving. The woman, wearing a rubber corset and mini-skirt—practically a dominatrix outfit, all she needed was a whip—grabbed Frank's face in her hands and kissed her. *Really* kissed her. Like Cara Cara kissed her. Then Frank put her hands on the woman's fully inked arms and kissed her back, likewise.

What. The fuck. Juice didn't know whether to be turned on or jealous. His cock, however, was not as indecisive.

When Frank finally pulled back, she leaned up to speak into Dom Bitch's ear. Dom Bitch looked at Juice, and then at Frank, one eyebrow raised. Frank smiled and nodded, then pulled Dom Bitch back down so Frank could say something else, something that made Dom Bitch smile and nod. She gestured for them to follow, and Frank grabbed Juice's hand to do just that.

They were definitely going to have a long talk when they got back to Charming.

Dom Bitch led them into a back room, one that was fairly well soundproofed, and Juice had the immediate sensation of going deaf once DB closed the door behind them. The pulse of the bassline was the only sound that bled through. The room was covered in red and purple velvet, on the walls, the floor, the thickly plush sofas. A couple was making out heavily in one corner, half undressed and working on the rest, oblivious to the others in the room. It was a fucking pleasure palace, tucked in the back of a pipe-and-duct industrial hole . . . and then Juice knew what Frank was up to. He further deduced that DB was the Desi she had asked after.

Juice stood just inside the door, bells going off all over his brain. They were too far away from Charming for this crap. Frank and Desi were talking several feet away, and Desi didn't seem able to keep her hands off his girl. Her extremely inappropriate hands. And Frank didn't seem inclined to stop her. Juice had decided on jealous. He crossed his arms.

Then Desi handed Frank something and walked over to a shelving unit stocked with liter-size bottles of water. She brought one to Frank.

Juice thought this was all a terrible idea. He needed to get her out of here. As he said, "Frank," she swallowed what he assumed was a dose of E. Why they had to come all the way to Sac so Frank could get her ecstasy on he had no idea.

His life would be much easier if she'd stick to beer and weed.

She came over to him and held out a dose for him, smiling sweetly.

“Not a good idea, baby. One of us should be straight.”

She pouted. “It’s no fun if we’re not both in the same place. And this is pure molly, so I’m guaranteeing the fun. Less speedy, more touchy-feely. We can ride it out here if we need to. That’s what this room is for. Among other things. Come on, doofus. Don’t be scared. I got this handled. I’ll keep you safe.” She grinned wickedly.

He looked at her. She was so damn cute. She was relaxed and happy, in her element.

Oh, what the hell. He took the dose. Totally whipped.

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They went back out to the dance floor at first, waiting for molly to do its thing. Juice regretted swallowing the dose as soon as he'd done it, and worry was riding him hard. He was looking forward to getting that off his back.

Within an hour, it was. The music and lights felt like they were moving through his bloodstream. Frank was dancing right against her, her hands all over him. He felt touch tracers everywhere her skin touched his, like velvet feathers. *Fuck*. Okay, she had a good idea.

It had hit Frank faster, and she was fully engaged. She was watching him with an expression of wonder and naked desire. His cock was huge and hard and throbbing, but he didn't want to get off the dance floor. He considered doing her right there, but had enough sense left to discard the notion. And then her hands were sliding under his waistband, into his boxers, wrapping around him.

He picked her up by the waist, her hand sliding out of his jeans as she rose, and kissed her. She wound herself completely around him and started humping him. Each pulse of her body on his rippled out from his cock, making his flesh and bone sing. Still kissing her, he searched around the perimeter of the dance floor for Desi's door. He found it at last and headed straight for it, miraculously forging a clear path through the press of writhing bodies by simply walking steadily forward.

He got them through the door and dropped down on one of the plush sofas. Frank was still wrapped on her, grinding hard. Her hands went up under his t-shirt then, and she went still. So did he, as her hands moved slowly, meandering over the ridges of his torso. Holy God, that felt good.

She broke from their kiss and sat back to watch him, her intense blue eyes almost glowing, her expression awed. She curled her fingers in and lightly scratched his nipples, and a powerful bolt of pleasure surged straight through him. He threw his head back hard and moaned.

His head still back, he put his hands on her shoulders and caressed her, gently massaging, working down her upper arms. He could feel the movement of his hands on her on her hands on him, pulsing through her fingers. He brought his head back up so he could see her. He was deeply captivated by her ink and ran his thumb slowly over the pattern. It had always fascinated him; even when he was straight, it was the most beautiful piece he'd ever seen. Her own design, of course.

It was a pointillism piece covering her arm from her elbow over her shoulder and sort of furling across the top of her back. It was growing across her back, really; she wasn't done with it yet. Just abstract shapes, with a vaguely organic look to them. It was spectacularly detailed and composed of nothing but thousands and thousands of tiny dots of black ink. Right now, each dot seemed to stand away from her skin and vibrate under his thumb.

Her hands were still on him, kneading and caressing the muscles of his abdomen. He slid his hands up over her shoulders, up her neck, holding her. He wrapped one hand around her ponytail and brought her mouth to his. Kissing her as deeply as he could, sliding his tongue along the silk of hers, feeling the vibrations of her moans against his teeth, he dropped his hands and slid them up her legs. Her polka-dot covered legs. Her clothes had been nothing but a nuisance all damn night.

She pulled back and smiled at him, then unwound herself and stood up. She loosened and kicked off her Docs and shimmied out of her leggings. He could see her naked body under the sheer netting of her black tutu. He knew there were other people in the room, strangers, but he could not have cared less. He opened his jeans and pulled himself out. Still smiling, she straddled him and sank down on his shaft, her skirt billowing around them.

*Sweet Jesus.* He took in a long, gasping breath and arched into her. She felt like satin, like hot sweet cream, and the pleasure spread out in pulsing tendrils from his cock through his belly and into every corner of his body. He put his hands around her hips and held her tight to him. At first, he didn't want to move at all; he just wanted to sit perfectly still while the pleasure pulled him under and he drowned in it.

Then Desi came up behind Frank and went to her knees. She pushed Juice's knees open and slid between them so that her chest was pressed to Frank's back. Juice had just enough conscious interest in his surroundings to notice and to register her presence as unexpected, but he was too wrapped up in feeling Frank on him to care much at first.

Desi brought her arms around and unlaced Frank's little velvet top, baring her breasts to Juice's gaze and Desi's touch. He watched as the older woman cupped Frank's breasts, caressing, kneading, squeezing. Frank dissolved into her touch, her eyes closed, arching back, her head on Desi's shoulder. Desi took hold of the ring in Frank's nipple and pulled. Frank cried out and clenched hard on Juice's cock—the sensation exploded around him in light, color and sound, and his head swam. She turned her head toward Desi, and the women kissed deeply.

A part of him didn't like this at all, didn't want to share Frank, didn't want to share this experience they were having, just wanted to be alone with her. That part was overcome by the undertow of the huge crashing wave of his lust. This was high-octane fantasy stuff going on here.

Frank and Desi were kissing. Desi was kneading and pinching Frank's breasts hard. Frank was grinding rhythmically on Juice's cock, moaning constantly into Desi's mouth. Her nails scratched gently at his stomach. Juice was just sitting there, overwhelmed, feeling like he was being pulled whole into Frank. Eventually realizing he was being somehow left out of this party, he flattened his hand over Frank's belly and pressed his thumb to her wet clit.

She gasped and sat straight up, abandoning Desi's mouth to lean in instead to kiss him, her hands coming up to frame his face. He could taste the fruity flavor of Desi's lip gloss on Frank's lips.

Desi's hands fell away from Frank, and Juice sensed her standing up and moving away. Now it was just Juice and his girl, and he liked that much better, no matter how outrageously sexy it had been to watch Frank give herself over to another woman's touch. He wrapped his arms around her and deepened their kiss as she rocked harder and harder on him. When she was finally ready, she tore her mouth away, sucking in air. They came together, Frank's teeth sunk into his shoulder. It felt like forever, and it was the single most intensely erotic experience of Juice's life.

## CHAPTER 12:

### “Drunken Butterfly,” Sonic Youth

Frank woke up the next afternoon alone in Juice’s bed. Her mouth was a little dry, and she was a little sore, kinda all over, but otherwise she felt good. Desi’s shit was the best, and she took good care. She got up and stretched—oof. She was quite sore between her legs, actually, and her breasts were tender. She thought about that for a second and then smiled. Totally worth it.

She found Juice’s t-shirt on the floor and pulled it on. After a quick trip to the bathroom, she went out to find her guy.

Juice’s house was in serious need of a makeover by someone with an eye for design. Or just eyes, really. He had almost no furniture—only a bed in his room, a cheap-ass table and chairs in the kitchen, a fairly decent sectional sofa in the living room, a desk and a pile of computers and hacker gear in one of the other bedrooms. The other rooms in his basic, 3-bedroom ranch were empty. He had an impressive electronics setup in the living room: a huge entertainment center with a 60-inch TV, all the consoles, an extensive collection of games and DVDs. His idea of décor was Harley posters, video game posters, Transformers posters, and porno posters, all of them just pinned to the walls. Oh—and life-size cardboard cutouts. He had three: a stormtrooper, Wolverine, and Batman—The Dark Knight.

He wasn’t a slob, thank God. The place was clean, even the bathrooms. He just had no taste.

Juice was in the kitchen, making oatmeal on the stove. Yuck. Frank hated oatmeal. Like eating somebody else’s snot. He looked up as she came in the room. “Hey, baby. How you feeling?”

She got a bottle of water out of his fridge. “Hey. I’m great. How about you?” She opened the bottle and drank it mostly down. Much better.

He stepped over to her and kissed her forehead. “Okay, I think. Still processing. Once you get some food in you, we need to talk.”

Sigh. Fine, whatever. “I’m not eating that. I hate oatmeal.”

The look he gave her was way too parental for her taste. “You need something rich and filling after last night. I’ll put some fruit in it; it’ll be good.”

Man, she’d been feeling mellow and didn’t want to end up in a fight after they’d just had such an *awesome* night. But now her back was up. “You are such a fucking nanny. I took care of myself just fine before you turned up. I’m not eating fucking oatmeal.” She pulled a banana off a bunch on the counter. “I’ll eat this, okay?”

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed. “Fine.”

He made himself a bowl of oatmeal and poured coffee for them both. They sat at the glass-top table and ate in silence. When she finished the banana, she sat with her hands around her coffee

mug and watched him. She'd been expecting a much happier morning. She thought Juice would be into what they did last night—sure seemed like he was. Over and over. All night long.

He finished his breakfast and pushed the bowl back. He regarded her for a minute, then said, "Tell me about Desi."

"She's cool. The club is hers—she owns the whole building, actually. I love that she's landlord to accountants and lawyers by day, but by night she's a punk empress. She's kinda the Gemma of that scene."

"I'll ask a different way. Tell me about *you* and Desi."

Shit. He was *jealous*? "Juice—are you seriously jealous?"

"Let me think. You had your tongue down her throat and she had her hands all over you *while I was inside you*. And then later she—. Hmmmm. Yeah, you know what? I'm jealous."

She laughed. It pissed him off that she did, but she couldn't help it. "Dude, that was the molly."

"Yeah, okay. But something tells me you knew that would happen before we even left Charming."

"Well, yeah. I knew there was a good chance. I was hoping. I meant it as a surprise for you, I guess. I really thought you'd be into it. I mean, you have girl-on-girl posters all over your bedroom. Plus, I thought it would be awesome to roll when you didn't have to wear a condom—and come on, it was *awesome*, wasn't it?"

She watched him fight back a smile. *Yeah, dude, it was awesome. Admit it.* He was quiet for a while, long enough that Frank started to get fidgety. She was about to say something herself when he looked down at his hands on the table and said, "I guess the part I don't get is that you told me you'd only been with the high school boyfriend before me, and that seems like a lie now. I don't know why you'd lie about that."

Ah, okay. Now she got it. "No, I said I'd only been with that *guy*."

He looked at her. "Are you bi?"

She smiled and shrugged. "No, I'm straight. When I'm straight. When I'm rolling, I stick with women. Or I did, before you. I don't get sideways around guys. I don't trust—" She stopped short, thinking of, among other things, the first night Juice had been to her apartment. She could tell that he was thinking about the same thing.

She cleared her throat, hoping to move the discussion on. "*Anyway*, Desi's always taken care of me when I'm rolling. She has really good, trustworthy stuff, and she makes sure you stay hydrated and just safe. And sometimes she plays with the people she's taking care of, if they're open to that. That room is invitation only, by the way."

She watched him process. She hoped they were done. But sadly, they weren't. He said, "I'm surprised you're so into acid and E when you don't even like to get drunk. That stuff is way more hardcore."

"Alcohol makes me sleepy and stupid. Weed's okay, but it makes me slow. I don't like my senses dulled. I like them sharpened. I like to experience the world in a new way. I like to experience myself in a new way, too. And I absolutely fucking *hate* not remembering."

He nodded, but he had a strange, watchful look about him. "Okay. I have one more question, though. Is there a particular reason you don't trust guys?"

Sometimes she really wished he was as dumb as she'd first thought he was. She got up from the table and threw her banana peel away. She put her mug in the sink and got another bottle of water from the fridge.

He was watching her. As she was drinking the water, he said, "Baby?"

Oh, fuck it. Dodging was too much damn work. "Yeah, there is. The boyfriend? Who I thought I might love, by the way. He dosed me and passed me around. I came out of it hanging ass-up over the back of a couch, with one of his fat fuck friends slamming his puny little pecker in me, and the rest of 'em watching and waiting to have another go. Then I got dumped for being a slut. So, yeah. I don't trust guys. Oh, and I guess I did lie about the boyfriend being the only guy before you. Sorry."

And that was about as much of this conversation as she could handle. She walked out of the room and went straight into the shower. She left Juice sitting at the table with his jaw twitching and his fists clenched.

So much for waking up feeling good and mellow.

OOO

She showered until the hot water ran out. When she came out, wrapped in a towel, Juice was sitting on the bed. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't know."

"I know. Obviously. It's fine."

"No, it's not. It's miles from fine. Do those guys still live in Charming?"

Oh, God. Frank sighed and sat down next to him on the bed. "It was four years ago, Juice. Leave it alone. You can't be retroactively heroic."

"You honestly don't want them to get what's coming to them? Because I can make that happen. You have no idea how hard I can make that happen—or how bad I want to."

“As satisfying as that does sound, what they did is in the past. I want to keep it there. The past has no power over me.”

“I know, I know. ‘Always forward.’ But Frank—”

She cut him off, done with this. “No. Let it go, Juice. And Garrett doesn’t know, so keep your yap shut.”

He’d picked up her hand and was tracing her fingers with his thumb. “There’s a lot Garrett doesn’t know, isn’t there?”

“Garrett’s on a need-to-know basis. He worries enough. I keep your secrets, you keep mine.”

“Okay.” He gave her a wry smile. “Hey—the next time we go out on a date, can we maybe just do dinner and a movie?”

She laughed and hugged him, the towel dropping away. “Okay, Grandpa. Geez, you’re such a prude.”

He folded his arms around her and pressed her down on the bed. “Prude, huh? Sounds like I need to prove you wrong.” He kissed her.

She rubbed his hands over his scalp, savoring the sandpapery feel of his head before its daily shave. After a minute, she pulled back from the kiss just a bit, enough to say, “Let’s go slow, though, okay? Last night was pretty intense.”

He leaned away from her, brow furrowed. “You okay?”

“I’m good. I just feel like I had a *lot* of sex. I want you in me—just go easy.”

“Easy it is, then. I can do you easy all day long.”

She put her hands around his face. “Come on. Admit it. Last night was pretty hot.”

He grinned down at her. “Last night was the hottest night of my life. But let’s leave that for special occasions, okay?”

“Prude.” She pulled his head down and slid her pierced tongue into his mouth.

## CHAPTER 13

“Prison Bound,” Social Distortion

“21 Guns,” Green Day

Juice took an armload of empty soda and beer bottles out to the recycling bin in Garrett’s garage. When he came back into the kitchen, Frank was bent over, filling the dishwasher. He walked up behind her and leaned over her back to kiss her neck. She tipped her head to his for a second and then stood up and pushed him back a little. “You’re not making this job any easier, doof.”

“Not trying to.” He swatted her ass and went back into the dining room for another cleanup round.

They were winding up an evening of playing board games with Garrett and a couple of friends, Level Up regulars. One of them was Marnie, a girl who’d been hanging around a lot when Garrett was working. She had a sarcastic sense of humor and was kinda mousy-cute, and Frank had hopes that something would catch between them. The other, Brian, was an unofficial employee of sorts, who’d hung around so much during Saturday trading-card tournaments that he was now helping organize and run them. For fun. Because he was the biggest geek of any of them. No small feat.

Brian had already left, but Marnie was still lingering. No question she was interested, but Juice didn’t see any signs that Garrett had really noticed. He clearly liked her, but Juice thought he was oblivious to the blinking neon “Do Me Now” sign over Marnie’s head every time Garrett spoke to her.

Juice had never seen his friend with a woman. Frank had told him that Garrett had been 100% in Responsible Parent mode since their folks had died, and she didn’t think he’d look up until she was out of college. But that was only a couple of months away now. Frank wanted her brother to get a life, so she was busily matchmaking.

To see Garrett’s house, which had been their parents’ house, the house he and Frank had grown up in, was to know that he had not yet thought about having a life. Except for the shop, Garrett seemed locked in stasis. Frank had told him that *nothing* in the house had changed since their parents’ death, except that Garrett now slept in their bed. He hadn’t even moved his clothes from his original room. The photos and wall hangings, the knick knacks, the draperies, the bowl of wax fruit on the dining room table—their mother had selected and placed it all.

It crept Frank out to spend much time there, and Juice understood why. It was like a broken diorama of a happier family. Garrett had taken their parents’ place in Frank’s life and then just froze there. No wonder he spent so much time at the shop. No wonder Frank didn’t come over here much.

This evening, though, had been her idea. She hoped that having people in here would shake him up a bit. Maybe it worked. He’d enjoyed entertaining, that was clear—buying party snacks and

booze and setting up the dining room for gaming. And now he was sitting on the couch, talking quietly with Marnie. Huh.

Frank came up behind Juice and put her arms around his waist, her chin on his back. “Hey. Let’s make ourselves scarce. You wanna see something hilarious?”

“Sure. Lead the way.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him through the kitchen and into the hallway.

Family photos lined both walls in a hall which obviously led to bedrooms. Juice stopped to look. Frank pulled at him briefly, then gave up and let him have his look.

Aside from the standard scattering of school photos of Garrett and Frank and several whole-family department store portraits, all of the photos were candid. They weren’t professional quality, but they were sweeter and more real for their flaws. Vacations, holidays, parties, band concerts for Garrett and dance recitals for Frank. They were all totally ordinary photos chronicling an abbreviated family history.

That was one sad hallway. He couldn’t believe Garrett walked through it every day.

Frank stopped him at a door toward the end of the hall. He knew where she was leading him. The door had flowers and vines painted all over it, a riot of color and shape. It was really cool.

She opened the door and turned on the overhead, and Juice got a view of the site of the princess to punk transition. The furniture was white and curvy—single bed, bookcase, nightstand, dresser with a big oval mirror and a little round upholstered stool. In a corner near the window was a big drafting table and a high stool, the only furniture that didn’t match. The walls were petal pink. The carpet was dark pink. He imagined it must have looked a bit like a furnished vagina, before her interests took a sharp turn. He could see that she’d painted flowers on the walls, too, but plastered over the flowers were punk posters, concert bills, and lots of dark, ragey, spiky drawings and paintings. This was a room in which a happy little girl turned into an angry young woman.

He turned and looked at her. “I’m not sure I get the hilarity.”

“Come on—look at all the girly puke everywhere. That’s pretty fucking funny.”

“Sorry, baby. It makes me kinda sad.” He didn’t like the look she gave him—defensive. She didn’t want pity, he knew that, and she’d go at him full bore if she got a whiff of it. He backed off, not wanting a fight. “But yeah, the pink is obnoxious. I can’t believe you wanted to sleep inside a Pepto bottle.”

“I know, right? What a dweeb. Hey—you wanna fuck on my little princess bed?” She grabbed his hands and pulled him toward the bed in question.

He didn't, actually. The room—the house, really—had all sorts of weird vibes and made him want to hold her and love her and protect her, but didn't remotely make him want to fuck her. He laughed and said, “You know what? I don't think Garrett would love that. Let's wait, and I'll fuck you silly at your place.”

She sighed. “God, you're so his bitch. Fine. I wonder if he pulled his head out of his ass and asked Marnie out.”

“Let's go see.” Phew. Battle averted.

Garrett was walking back in the front door, having seen Marnie out. He was smiling. He saw Frank and Juice walking into the living room and asked, “Hey, sissy, would you mind closing alone tomorrow? Marnie's never been to that sushi place by the mall, and I told her I'd take her.”

Juice and Frank grinned at each other and bumped fists. Garrett wrinkled his brow at them. “What?”

Frank laughed. “Garry, I was starting to think she was going to have to lie down on the shop counter and spread her legs in your face before you'd get the message. That girl wants you bad.”

Juice nodded. “It's stupid obvious, man.”

Garrett looked at them both and then waved them away. “Whatever. You good for closing alone or not, brat?”

“Course.” She looked at Juice. “Hey—I'm gonna hit the loo, then you ready to split?”

He nodded, and she trotted off down the hall.

Then Juice was standing alone in the living room with Garrett. It was the first time he'd been alone with Garrett in the two weeks since he'd found out what Frank's high school boyfriend had done to her. He hadn't stopped thinking about it since, a red thread of rage running through his head all the time. She'd told him to drop it, but he hadn't said he would.

Garrett walked into the kitchen, and Juice followed. He knew that if he found out a name, dropping it would cease to be an option. Right now, he didn't have a direction to pursue, and he could consider doing what Frank wanted. But all he'd need is that one name, and he'd be able to find them all. If he had the name, he'd have the power, and he would fuck them up. He would have to.

He had only seconds to decide. The conversation needed to be *over* when Frank got back.

“Hey, Garrett—let me ask you something. Do you remember Frank's boyfriend in high school?”

Standing at the sink squeezing out the sponge with which he was wiping the counter, Garrett looked over at him. “That putz? Yeah. He was way too impressed with himself, but she thought

he was dreamy. Jackoff dumped her their senior year. She was pretty broken up over him for a while. Why?”

“Do you remember his name?”

“Again I ask: why?”

“Just curious.”

Garrett turned fully to him and leaned against the counter. “Man, you must think I’m stupid. There’s gotta be a reason for your sudden interest in a guy she hasn’t seen in four years—and for you to ask *me* instead of her. And I know you well enough to know it can’t be a good reason. What’s up?”

Frank walked down the hall and into the room then. “Ready, doof?”

Juice looked at Garrett and gave the slightest shake of his head. Garrett caught it and held his tongue, but the look he sent back told Juice they weren’t done.

“Ready, baby. See ya later, Garrett.”

They left. As they rode to Frank’s apartment, Juice contemplated the difficult situation his impulse had created. He didn’t have a name yet, but now Garrett was on the scent. With one question, Juice had betrayed Frank’s confidence twice.

That was going to bite him hard in the ass.

OOO

As Juice pulled up in front of Clear Passages a few days later, Garrett came out of Level Up and trotted across the street.

It had been a shitty few days. The Feds had finally hit their limit on his crap info, and now they’d gotten specific: they wanted him to bring in a sample from the current shipment of coke the Sons were muling for the Galindo cartel.

They wanted him to *steal coke* from a *Mexican drug cartel*. Now they were telling him that Otto Delaney, a Son in prison, was ready to flip on the club. Otto flipping and giving the Feds criminal history made the crap info Juice had been meting out a lot less crappy, so it wasn’t just Juice’s ass on the line anymore if he refused. Now the Sons were on the hook. Juice either helped the Feds get the cartel, or the entire club was destroyed.

They didn’t want much for the sample, so the loss itself might go undetected, but the shipment was guarded, as usual, by Sons and Mayans, and he had no fucking idea how he was going to get to it.

But now Garrett was coming up on him, and a whole different set of problems moved up to the fore of Juice's weary head.

"Hey, man."

Juice took off his helmet and set it on the handlebars. "Hey, Garrett." He was guarded; he hadn't talked to his friend since game night. There were a couple of big questions hanging in the air between them.

Garrett looked over at his shop. "Can you come over and talk for a few minutes? I'm alone in the shop this afternoon, and we should have some privacy. It's dead this time of day. But I still have to get back in there."

Juice considered. He hadn't figured out yet how to balance the conversation they were sure to have against Frank's specific and clearly stated wishes. "Yeah, okay. Let's go." They crossed the street and went into Level Up.

Garrett didn't say anything until he got behind the front desk. Then he sat down on one of the stools back there and gestured to Juice to take the other. Instead, Juice leaned against the counter.

"He hurt her, right? And not just 'why oh why doesn't he love me' teen heartache."

Juice didn't say anything. He'd really had no intention ever to betray Frank's secret, but he didn't know how to get out of this conversation without doing so. And he wanted that name.

Garrett stood and kicked the stool over. He was a chill dude, and the act surprised Juice—for Garrett, kicking the stool was about the same as Juice throwing that stool through a window. "Goddammit, Juice. You understand that saying nothing is the same thing as saying yes here, right? So you're just leaving me to imagine whatever I can think up—and it turns out I can think up some nasty shit."

Juice sighed. He had to say something. "She doesn't want you to know. I told her I'd keep the secret. I got myself into a real bind here, man." *Bind* was his natural habitat, these days.

Walking right up to Juice and straightening up so that he looked down from all of his several inches of greater height, Garrett spat through clenched teeth. "I could not care less about your bind. What the fuck did he do?"

It was by far the most aggressive gesture he'd ever made toward Juice, and Juice didn't want to end up in a place where he'd have to hurt his friend. He put his hand flat on Garrett's thin chest and pushed him back. "Chill, man. Sit down. I'll tell you, but you have to let me handle it. And you can't let her know you know. She'd never forgive me for telling you, but I don't think she'd forgive you for even knowing. You *have* to be normal around her."

Garrett stepped back, leaning on the back counter. "Jesus. Tell me."

So Juice told him what he knew. It didn't take long. Hell, Frank had told him in about three sentences. When he was done, Garrett was leaning with his hands on the counter, his head down. Without raising his head, he said, "Jordan Elster. I don't know his friends or where they are, but Elster is still around. He's a server at Olive Garden in Lodi."

"I can find them all, Garrett. All I needed was his name, and now I can find them all."

OOO

Chibs dragged Juice into his bedroom and helped him into bed. "I'm goin' ta call your wee lass, Juicy. You need her tonight, yeah? Better nurse than me. Nicer to look at, too."

Juice turned his head away. "No, don't. I'm good on my own, Chibs. Thanks."

His attempt to take a sample of the coke had gone horribly, horribly wrong. Miles had caught him with the brick he was going to get the sample from. And Juice had killed him. Miles had gotten off a shot, too, which had sliced through Juice's thigh. He'd spent the evening lying on Jax's kitchen table while Tara, a doctor, stitched him up.

He'd fucking shot a brother in the face. And then, as the Sons came running at the sound of gunfire, hardly even thinking about it, he'd framed Miles for the theft, branding him a traitor and a thief. The Prospects buried him without his kutte, in an unmarked grave. Disposing of a traitor.

The Sons were taking care of Juice as their brother, who'd been hurt exposing a traitor in their midst. The guilt was crushing him.

Juice was sick and scared and stunned. He didn't want Frank here. He didn't want Frank anywhere near him. Ever again. Bringing her into the life of a Son was one thing. Bringing her into the life of a murderous traitor was something else entirely.

He didn't want her in this life.

He wanted to die.

The drugs Tara had given him finally kicked in, and he closed his eyes.

OOO

He woke with a powerful need to piss and a screaming pain in his right thigh. He tried to sit up, but the stitches pulled, and the pain was too much. He tried to roll off the bed instead. As he struggled, he heard Frank's voice behind him.

"Wait. Let me help you." She'd been lying next to him. Fuck Chibs. *Fuck* him. She got up and came around to his side of the bed. As she did, he held his breath and forced himself to sit up and swing his legs over the side. *Fuck*, his leg hurt. Good.

“Leave me alone, Frank. What are you doing here?”

She put her hands on his arms to help him—which, aside from being exactly what he didn’t want her doing, was fucking ridiculous. No way she could get him up. He shook her off.

“You can’t help me. Go home.”

“Fuck you. You can’t help yourself.” She stood back, with her hands on her hips. “Just sit tight a sec.” She trotted out of the room.

She came back carrying a chair from the kitchen. “Here. Try this.” She put it down in front of him, its back facing him. He sat there for a minute, feeling obstinate, wanting her away, but wanting her to hold him, too.

She had her hands on her hips again. “Either you stand up, or you don’t. Your call.”

He needed to piss. She apparently wasn’t going to go away. Not yet, anyway. So he pulled himself up, used the chair like a walker, and got himself to the bathroom.

When he came back out, she was holding a bottle of water. She watched without a word as he hobbled back to bed. Once he had himself more or less settled, she held out the water and two pills. “You’re supposed to take these. Tara’s orders.”

He looked her in the eye for a second, but he couldn’t hold the look. He dropped his eyes to the bed. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want you at all. We’re done. Go home. Stay away.” He was going to cry, he could feel it. He bit the insides of his cheeks until he tasted blood, and he forced the tears back.

He didn’t look up. She was quiet. She didn’t move. Then, she cleared her throat. Her voice sounded tight, but her words were steady. “Well, I wasn’t expecting that. But until you can carry me out, I don’t think you have much of a say. I’m staying. I told you I was in, so fuck you and what you don’t want.”

Then his tears came. He put his head in his hands and sobbed.

OOO

One more note: If you’ve also read my Opie story, maybe you thought to yourself, “Man, she did *another* photo wall scene.” Guilty. I am just personally struck by the phenomenon of the family photo wall and how much it says about the family represented in it. I find it poignant in real life, and it seemed to work well in both of these situations. You probably noticed that I’m also struck by the way family “ghosts” inhabit a home.

I wrote the first scene of this chapter without really thinking about the way it resonated with The Rose and the Thorn, and then I couldn’t bring myself to delete or change it. I think (hope) the

photos and “ghosts” have a different function in this story, for these characters, than they do in The Rose and the Thorn.

## CHAPTER 14:

“The Part Where You Let Go,” Hem

She'd held him while he cried. Then she'd gotten him to take the pills and held him until he fell back to sleep.

Frank didn't know what was going on. Juice had been shot, and she was suddenly getting to know a whole lot of SAMCRO people, but no one was telling her anything. Gemma had called her and told her that Juice had been hurt and needed her. She didn't even bother to wonder how Gemma had her number. The Sons probably had her fucking grade school transcripts, so a cell number was small potatoes.

She'd come right away. He'd been asleep. Chibs was there, and he'd explained about Juice's wound and had told her what to do until Tara came by in the morning. He left her a bunch of numbers, and then he'd gone. Frank had lain down next to Juice and watched him sleep.

She hadn't been prepared at all for his hostility toward her when he woke up, and certainly not for him trying to break up with her. Her first reaction to his words, her refusal to go, was mainly propelled by spite and fury, which had roared up her spine as soon as he'd said he didn't want her. But then he'd started to cry. It was all very confusing.

So now she was puttering around his house, generally doing what she could to take care of her guy—because she was seeing to it that he set that breakup shit right the fuck to the side, whatever it was. She didn't really have any experience taking care of anybody but herself, so she had to guess what it was she was supposed to be doing.

She put his bloody clothes in the wash. She ordered a big pile of Chinese food, since she didn't cook, and it was as good cold as hot, so it would be ready for him whenever. And she fielded calls and drop-bys from the Sons. Everybody treated her like they already knew her well, even though she was still not entirely solid on names. It was weird. And also kinda cool.

Tara came by early and checked on him, but he didn't wake while she was there. Three Sons—Tig, Happy, and Bobby—came by together shortly after that, to see if Juice or she needed anything. Gemma called. Opie called. She was starting to think they weren't so sure Juice was in good hands.

It wasn't that hard to take care of him. Mostly what he did was sleep. When he was awake, he didn't do much talking. He didn't fight her being there anymore, but he wasn't glad about it, either. She changed his sheets during a bathroom visit. She got him to eat, and she got him to take his antibiotics. And he was always ready when she brought him pain meds. And then he slept.

It was getting late in the afternoon, not long after Opie called, when Lilli stopped by. Frank was feeling lonely and depressed, and she was looking forward to when Garrett could come over and keep her company, but that wasn't for hours yet, after he closed the shop.

When Lilli came in—nobody knocked in this family, apparently—Frank was in the kitchen, cleaning up after Juice’s spring rolls and General chicken.

“Hey, Frank. Opie said it sounded like you could use some company. Juice being a pain in the ass?”

“No, he’s easy. He sleeps mostly. I’m fine, Dr. Accardo.” Frank couldn’t get used to seeing her professor off campus, in this environment. As great as it was to have somebody in this group she already knew a little, a woman who was involved with another Son, she was still in awe. The idea of calling her by her first name, even though she called other professors, even Andre, by their first names, seemed bizarre and intimidating.

The professor laughed. “You have to call me Lilli, Frank. I will never hear the end of it from these cretins if you walk around calling me Dr. Accardo in front of them.” She nodded toward Juice’s bedroom. “He sleeping now?”

Frank nodded. “Yeah, he took a pill about an hour ago, so he’ll probably sleep for a while.”

“Let’s sit then, take a load off.”

Frank hesitated briefly without knowing really why, then followed Dr.—*Lilli* to the living room. They sat on the sectional, since that was the only place in the room to sit.

“Seems like you’re getting a crash course in the life, doesn’t it?”

Frank realized that her professor could teach her some things. She was sitting right there, and it seemed like maybe she was even offering to teach her some things. In a lot of ways, Juice had been useless so far, too much in the life himself to be able to explain it to her. But Lilli was like her. Or, rather, she was now like Lilli.

“Definitely. I’m pretty confused, but I don’t feel like I can ask any questions.”

“You can. If it’s something you can’t know, they’ll tell you. There’s a lot of that, by the way, and if you’re told you can’t know, it’s best to drop it. Part of our deal as their women is that we accept that they have secrets. And you need to be *sure* you can handle the answer before you ask the question. Understand how much you really want to know. But if you’re Juice’s girl, then you are part of the family, and you can ask. Ask me. I’ll tell you what I can, what I know.”

A wave of relief washed over Frank. “For starters, I don’t know what happened to him, other than he got shot. But he’s so upset. There’s something else going on.”

Lilli sat forward. “Well, I don’t know firsthand, or any details, really, but Juice got shot by Miles—another Son. You met him at the dinner, the guy with the kind of curly, sandy hair and the longish goatee?”

Frank nodded. She remembered him, though she hadn't remembered his name. He hadn't made much of an impression, really.

Lilli went on. "Juice shot and killed him in self-defense. I don't know anything more than that. But it's an incredibly big deal for these men. Betraying the club is the worst thing in this world. But even so, to kill a brother, even in self-defense, would be incredibly painful to any of these guys. I imagine Juice *is* really upset."

Frank didn't have any words, so she sat quietly, trying to think.

The room was getting dark, and Lilli looked around until she found the floor lamp next to the entertainment center and switched it on. She laughed. "Wow, his house sucks, doesn't it? He's such a boy." She sat back down near Frank.

"He tried to break up with me this morning."

Lilli laughed again. Frank thought that was weird and irritating, at least, and got defensive right away. Lilli must have seen her posture change, because she said, "Sorry. I'm not laughing because I think a breakup would be funny. It's funny because it's so typical."

Now that she was feeling pissed, Frank was a lot less intimidated, so she crossed her arms and stared at Lilli with her eyebrows up.

"The club life is a rough one, and these guys are usually waist-deep in some scary, violent stuff. Really violent. Even so, I think none of them would have any idea at all what to do with themselves in any other kind of life. But they aren't all built the same. Some really love the life and feel very little if any conflict about the things they have to do. They are good at the violence, and they are happy to step up when violence needs doing."

Frank could feel her eyes growing wider. She tried to shake it off and find a more composed expression. But Lilli had seen her shock.

"I'm not saying that they do harm randomly or without cause, because they don't. They live by a staunch code. They have honor. They protect innocents. They love intensely. But people who do them or their families or friends harm are repaid. And some Sons have less trouble meting out repayment than others. The club is structured so that the Sons who deal with it better are out front on those jobs. But all Sons do what needs to be done, and some of them get pretty messed up over it sometimes. Opie is one of those. Jax is one. And Juice is, too."

Frank was both overwhelmed and relieved to be finally allowed to understand this world better, but she still didn't understand Lilli's point. "I don't know what you mean, though, that it's 'typical' for Juice to want to break up."

Lilli nodded. "It gets confusing. Trust me, I know. Guys like Opie, Juice, and Jax are complicated people. They want to be good men. And they are, though most normal people would disagree, because they're outlaws. They want to do the right things, but what's right for a Son is

hardly ever the same thing as what's right for a normal person. They want to give their families a normal life, but they don't have a normal life to give. And they want to keep the people they love safe."

Lilli stopped and looked at Frank, as if Frank was supposed to now understand her point. Maybe she was being incredibly dense, or maybe she was just overwhelmed, but the point was eluding her. "Okay, and . . ."

"And they think the only way to keep us safe is to send us away. The more intense their own pain, the harder they push. It sucks. God, it sucks. But you have to understand yourself, know whether you can ride those times out. If you can't, that's totally understandable. It hurts. Sometimes they push really hard.

"I'm not saying you can't set boundaries. You should. Know where your line is, the line he can't cross. But they need—" She paused. "*Juice needs* you to be steady. He needs someone who loves him no matter what, because sometimes the 'what' with these guys gets pretty fucking intense. If you can love him like that, then ride his shit out. It'll be worth it. Because nobody is going to love you as deeply as he will.

Then Lilli laughed sheepishly. "Sorry to get professorial on you. I hope that wasn't too much. I just want you to know that I get it, and you can come to me for help if you need it."

Frank was freaked out, but she was so grateful she didn't know what to say. So she didn't say anything until she sorted it out. "I finally feel like I understand a little bit. All Juice has told me is that they're bad and they do bad. But that's not him, and it didn't make any sense. Then I met everybody and they seemed mostly cool, and *you're* in it, and it still didn't make any sense. Now it does, I think, a little. So thank you, Dr.—Lilli."

They heard Juice stirring in the bedroom. Frank stood right away, but Lilli said, "Would you mind if I went back?"

"That would be great, actually. I need to get him his meds and something to eat. Thanks."

When Frank went back several minutes later, carrying a tray with a sandwich, a bottle of water, and his meds, Juice was propped up in bed, looking more normal than he had all day. Lilli was sitting on the corner of the bed, and she and Juice were looking intently at one another. As she came in the room, Lilli stood and said, "Buck up, bucko." She kissed his cheek. As she walked toward the door, she kissed Frank's cheek, too, and said, "Call me if you need me, okay?" Frank smiled and nodded, and Lilli left.

Frank turned to Juice, not sure what to expect. Hostility? Detachment? What? She brought him the tray. "I hope a sandwich is okay. I didn't think you'd want Chinese again, and, well, since you don't have anything I can put in the microwave, my cooking skills are tapped."

He smiled. It was a small, sad smile, but it was a step in the right direction. "It's great, thanks."

“You need anything else?” She put the tray over his legs.

He took the pills with a swallow of water. “Will you sit and talk with me awhile?”

“Not if you’re going to break up with me again, no. In that case, I think I’d rather go play Skyrim on your gigantic TV instead.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want you to go. I love you.”

“Funny way of showing it, asshole.”

He cocked his head. “So, will you sit?”

She straddled the kitchen chair by the bed, resting her arms on its back.

“I was hoping you’d sit next to me.” He indicated the bed.

“I’m good here, for now. So, talk. Tell me.”

He did. He didn’t really tell her anything Lilli hadn’t told her, but he proved the professor right. The raw pain in his voice, the way his hands shook, told her everything she needed to know about what happened, how he felt, and why he’d tried to push her away.

When he was done, she said, “I love you, Juice. Don’t push me away. I’m here. I can help you. I’m little, but I’m strong.” She grinned. “And if I can’t hold you up, at least I can bring you a chair.”

He laughed, and then he began to weep, and she got into bed with him and held him.

OOO

Garrett came by after he’d closed the shop. He brought soda and snacks. He gave Frank a huge, long hug when he saw her and kissed her the top of her head, which was weird, but it had been a weird day.

Having slept all day, and feeling better just in general, Juice was restless in his bedroom, especially since there was nothing to do in there but look at pictures of naked women tongue-wrangling. Garrett, who’d never been in Juice’s house, had a moment’s pause when he went in to help Juice get out to the living room.

“Not my place, I know, but as her brother I feel like I have to say that maybe the porno posters aren’t great if Frank is going to be here.”

Juice laughed. “They don’t bother her, man. Trust me.” Garrett gave him a curious look.

Frank, who was in the room with them and feeling like Juice was treading on territory that might well get him kicked right in the stitches, said, “You can both just shut the fuck up and let me decide what bothers me and what doesn’t, thanks. Move along, assholes.”

They got Juice settled, got popcorn popped and drinks poured, and they sat together on the sectional watching *The Fellowship of the Ring*, all three of them talking back to the screen and quoting whole scenes aloud.

Frank fell asleep with her head on Juice’s shoulder and his arm around her.

## CHAPTER 15:

“Hooligans,” Rancid

Juice spent every day that he couldn't ride his Dyna, every moment he had to himself, finding out everything he could about Jordan Elster, gang rapist.

The Feds seemed to be backing off a little. He had no idea why, and it didn't make any kind of sense, since they'd been on him so hard just days ago. He wasn't going to let his guard down, but he didn't mind at all getting a little space to breathe.

The enormity of what he'd done to Miles and to the club, and what the Feds were prepared to do to them, was far too much for him to even comprehend. In order to keep going, to be a Son, to be with his girl, he had to shove it all into a closet in the back of his mind and wedge a chair under the doorknob.

Instead, he focused his energy on tracking down the motherfuckers who'd hurt Frank. He'd made her go back to her regularly scheduled life after only a couple of days, once he could get up and around reliably on his own. She went without much fuss—Garrett needed her in the shop, and she was too close to graduation to bail on classes now—so Juice had a lot of time to work.

It was *very* focusing work. By the time his stitches were out and Tara had cleared him to ride, he had his head screwed on pretty straight again, and he knew quite a lot about Frank's high school squeeze. B student. Treasurer of the student council. Played right field for the school baseball team. Wrote a sports column for the school newspaper.

He drove a Ram pickup. Red. Considering the model year and date of registration, it had probably been a graduation gift from his parents. He drank his way out of college in his freshman year. Apparently, his parents cut him off at that point, because his info took a downward turn. Credit cards maxed. Bank account skinny. No savings. Collectors on his ass. He'd worked a series of low-skill jobs since; he'd been serving just shy of full-time at Olive Garden for about a year.

He lived alone in a shitty duplex on a shitty street on the outskirts of Charming.

Juice had accessed the Olive Garden personnel and management system, and he had Elster's work schedule on any given day. When Tara cleared him to ride, his first trip was to have lunch there. He then spent a couple of days tailing and checking in, getting to know Elster's habits.

What he hadn't been able to pin down yet were the friends he'd let at Frank. Juice had been sure he could figure that out by cross-referencing Elster's info against other students. And he had travel records, credit card statements, the school yearbook and newspaper photo logs, team rosters, all of it. The names circling Elster shifted too much, though. Juice could only narrow the list of his closest friends to seven names. That had to be too many. It had to be. Because if it wasn't . . .

It had to be.

But he wasn't going to be able to narrow down the list any more with the intel he could hack. He needed help. He needed another kind of intelligence.

He rode to T-M. Still limping a bit, he walked to the garage bays. There was only one Son in there, the one he wanted.

“Hey, Hap. Got a minute?”

OOO

Happy listened to what Juice had to say, his focus increasing with every word. When Juice had explained the situation and the help he needed, he looked at his brother and said, “I don't want to take it to the table, because she doesn't want people to know. But I can't do it on my own.”

A club enforcer and its interrogation specialist, Happy stared at Juice, his eyes narrow and shining. “I will do this with you, brother. I'm with you.”

OOO

Happy and Juice were standing in Jordan Elster's bedroom, looming over him as he slept. They were both wearing their black hoodies, their hands gloved, their faces covered with ski masks.

Happy looked at Juice. Juice nodded. Happy leaned over Elster and poked a long, vicious hunting knife into his neck, right along his carotid artery. He pushed the side of the blade into the sleeping man's neck until he woke. Elster's eyes went wide instantly, and he jerked. The point of blade went in, drawing blood that ran back along his neck in a thin line, pooling on his pillow.

Juice leaned down and said into his ear: “Move or make a sound without our okay, and we'll cut you into pieces before we kill you. Nod once if you understand.”

Elster nodded once, his head barely moving.

Juice and Happy bound, gagged, and hooded him, and threw him in the back of the club van.

OOO

They took him to a place Happy used, a derelict cabin deep in Elliot Oswald's woods, far from any human ears or eyes. And then they got to work.

They bound him to a chair, and then Happy pulled his hood and gag off. Elster stayed quiet, his eyes frantic, still cowed by Juice's threat. Happy said, “Make all the noise you need to now, boy. That would be fine. Make all the noise you can.” Then he stood back and turned, fussing with tools arrayed on a wheeled shop cart.

Elster took him up on that right away, yelling, “Who are you?! What do you want?! *What do you want?! I don’t have anything!*”

Juice stood in front of him and said, “That’s true. You have nothing. You’re gonna get something, though. This is about payback.”

Elster’s brow furrowed so deeply his eyebrows connected. “Payback for *what?* I haven’t *done* anything! I don’t *do anything!*”

Still concealed by his ski mask, Juice leaned down so that he was face to face with Jordan Elster. He spoke two words, low and with force. The most powerful words he knew. Her name. “Frank Duvall.”

“What? Frankie?” Then Elster’s eyes got huge and filled with water. “No, dude. No, no, no, no, no. Please, dude. That was a long time ago. I was an asshole kid. I’m sorry. Please, bro.”

Juice drove his fist hard into Elster’s face, rocking the chair back. Elster screamed, and blood streamed from his nose and lips, his nose well and truly broken. “Don’t you call me ‘bro,’ you piece of shit.”

Juice stepped back as Happy rolled the cart forward, into Elster’s field of vision. Elster pissed his pants.

“My brother here is going to give you a sample from his dessert cart, and then I’m going to ask you some questions.”

Happy pulled on pink dishwashing gloves and selected a pliers from his array of tools. He took hold of Elster’s right hand, bound at the wrist to the chair. Elster started to scream immediately. When Happy pulled the fingernail out of his index finger, his screams became hoarse, shrieking whoops, redoubled with every breath. His nose was so mashed, and swelling so quickly, that he could only breathe through his mouth. His lips were split and swelling, too, so he was spraying blood with every scream.

This was not the first time Juice had been party to an interrogation. He’d seen Happy and others, Sean Casey in Belfast not least of them, do some really intense shit. It had always made him feel sick and sad, no matter how much the guy deserved it.

Not tonight. Tonight all he felt was rage. Bloodlust.

When Happy stepped back and returned the pliers to the cart, Juice pulled up a stool and sat down in front of Elster, whose screams were settling into hitching sobs, his hand shaking in its bindings, dripping blood. Juice leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“Now, we know you made Frank into a party favor. We want the names of everyone who had a go at her. Every name, and you leave this room alive.”

Elster tried to catch his breath. “Wha—wha—what are you—gonna—do to ‘em?”

Juice looked at Happy, got off the stool, and pulled it out of the way. His grin obvious in his eyes, Happy came up—Elster started screaming “NONONONO!”—and took the nail of Elster’s right middle finger.

When Elster’s screams had died down to a chant of “Please, please, please, please,” Juice pulled the stool back and sat down.

“You don’t get to ask questions. You get to give answers. Names. Now.”

Elster gave him the names—five of them. *Five*. Six guys went at her that night. Juice’s rage was so enormous he wasn’t sure he could play out the plan. He wanted to kill this son-of-a-whore now. *Right the fuck now*.

Instead, he leaned close to Elster and said, “If you haven’t given us all the names, or if you gave us wrong names, we’ll come back for you. You know what we’ll do to you?” Elster nodded, and Juice went on. “Last chance: are these all the names, the right names?”

Elster nodded emphatically. “Yes! I swear! I swear!” And then, maybe thinking the worst was over, he got really stupid. “It was just a *party*, dude. We didn’t hurt her, we just boned her. And she wasn’t a virgin or anything. She let me bone her all the time.”

Juice went for his throat, tipping the chair back, both of them landing on the floor. He squeezed and squeezed as Elster’s bloody, swollen face turned red, then purple. As it started to go blue, Happy yelled, “Control, brother!” and pulled Juice off.

Juice stood and stepped back, walking away to take a breath and regroup. He pulled off his mask and turned to nod at Happy, who, eyes gleaming, pulled off his mask, too..

Not being a total idiot, Elster knew that was a bad sign. Through his ruined nose, his mushy lips, his abused throat, a garbled wail came out: “You said I’d get out of here alive! You said! You said!”

They cut him loose from the chair and dragged him across the room, screaming and writhing. They turned him face down and bound his hands to rings fastened to the wall, about three feet off the floor. Happy used the hunting knife to slice through his clothes. Then he picked up a broom handle.

Happy had his fun while Juice watched and Elster screamed and blubbered. Until he passed out. At that point, in addition to the broom handle, he was missing six fingernails and an ear, and had two smashed knees. They dragged his naked, bloody body outside, still breathing. They waited until he came to, and then Juice shot him in the crotch. They let him lie on the ground, writhing and screaming in terror and agony, feeling all of it, until he started to settle down. Then Juice squatted down close, put the silenced gun to his forehead and shot him between the eyes.

They buried him in the woods, cleaned up the cabin, and went back to town to deal with the red Ram truck he'd left behind. Juice kept his wallet with his ID.

Happy kept his ear.

## CHAPTER 16:

“Dig for Fire,” Pixies

When Frank came into the shop from the back room, Garrett and Juice were facing each other across the front desk. Something intense was going on, looked like. Juice pulled something off the counter as she approached—looked like a credit card or something.

“Hey, boys. Everything okay? You’re both vibey.”

Juice came up to her and kissed her forehead. His limp was almost gone. “We’re good. Just disagreeing over the best X-Men run.” Garrett smiled and shrugged.

She laughed. “God, you’re geeks. Also: *Astonishing X-Men*. Obviously.”

Juice put his arm around her shoulders and looked at Garrett. “Case closed, then, right?”

“Well, I don’t know. If you’re making the call based on your Kitty Pryde obsession, sissy, then I suggest *Uncanny X-Men*.”

She walked behind the desk and popped her brother on the arm. “*Astonishing*. Joss Whedon. Your argument is invalid.”

He laughed. “Fine, fine. I’ll humor you.”

Juice said, “Wise man.” He walked up to the counter. “Sorry, baby. I have to split. Looks like I’ll be out all night, too.”

He leaned over, and she went up on her tiptoes to kiss him across the counter. “That sucks. I’ll see you tomorrow, though, right?”

“Nothing’s gonna keep me from your big show.” The annual campus show of graduating art majors was the next night.

Juice looked at Garrett. “I’ll see ya, man.”

“Yeah. Later.” Frank still thought they were vibey. Weird.

Juice headed to the front. When he got to the door, he turned and said, “Oh, Frank, I almost forgot. Gemma’s going to call you. She wants to do a party at the clubhouse for your graduation.”

Oh, fuck! “No way, Juice. I want low key. I’m only walking because this asshole”—she elbowed Garrett in the gut—“pouted like a big baby about it. No biker blowout, *please*.”

Juice said, “Sorry, baby. Done deal. Gemma in party mode is a force of nature.” Then he ducked out, the coward.

She groaned. Garrett came up and hugged her. He was super affectionate lately. Frank figured he was getting all mushy over her upcoming graduation. He'd been taking care of her for a long time, and seeing her through college, she guessed, was almost as big a deal for him as for her.

It's not like anything was going to change much. She was getting a degree in art, for fuck's sake. Not a whole big pile of jobs for art majors. It was the shop and her little studio apartment for her, for the foreseeable. The only thing that was going to change was that she'd be at the shop more, meaning Garrett could work something less than sixty hours a week, maybe.

"You doing okay, sis?"

"Sure, Garry. I'm good. Marnie going to be around tonight?" In the few weeks since their sushi date, Garrett and Marnie had been hanging out a lot. Frank was pretty sure she'd even stayed over at the House of Death, though Garrett wasn't giving that kind of information out. Which was okay with Frank, since the thought of him getting busy in their dead parents' bed was *way* too creepy to contemplate.

"Yeah, she'll be by. We're getting something to eat after we close up. You want to come?"

Frank made a puke face. "God, no. No desire to watch you two make googly eyes at each other. I am going to enjoy a quiet evening in my little hovel with my giant cat and have ramen for dinner without getting a lecture about how it's not nutritious enough."

"We don't make googly eyes. I don't even know what that is. And he's right—ramen has no nutritional value whatsoever."

Frank laughed. "Fuck you. And I'll take a picture next time you google so you can see. It's so precious you'll croak, trust me. Or you can just take a good look at Marnie the next time you speak to her at all. Girl's got Garrett fever. Might be terminal."

He rolled his eyes at her. "You are such a brat."

"It's my superpower."

OOO

Frank was nervous about the art show—like, butterflies and palpitations nervous. She wasn't sure why; it was just a student show at a lousy state school, and the only people who would be there were professors, family, and friends of the students. It was so not a big deal.

But it would probably be her last show ever. There wasn't even one gallery in Charming. Once she graduated and the shop became her full-time gig (not that it wasn't already practically a full-time gig), art would be just a hobby. It was probably stupid as fuck to get a degree in it, but there just had never been anything else she wanted to do. And she sure had loved it.

One other thing made this show a bit of a deal. It included a juried competition, and she had something under consideration. The top prize was \$1000 and installation of the piece in the art building lobby, so, yeah, kinda cool.

She'd dyed her hair azure blue that morning and did her nails to match. She'd thought briefly about toning everything down, but there's only so toned down you can get with half your head shaved and a tattoo on your scalp. Plus, toned down just wasn't her gig.

As the day aged into afternoon and it was getting time to think about getting ready, she was standing in her closet in her underwear, at a loss. She'd laid out and discarded four different outfits already. She wasn't a lay-out-your-clothes kind of chick usually. Usually, she grabbed a piece that looked cool in that moment and worked from there, never really wavering. Because it really didn't matter. She could make anything work.

She was being weird. She thought about the way Juice and Garrett had been vibing lately. Everybody was being weird these days. It was weird.

Finally, she forced herself to get a grip and do what she always did. She grabbed the first cool thing she saw: a red plaid mini kilt. Then she dug up a black t-shirt with the Anarchy symbol across the front, thinking about Juice. In a lot of ways, the Sons of Anarchy weren't that different from punks—except they had a lot less style. Oh, yeah—and carried guns.

She pulled on white thigh-high tights and her silver platform Mary Janes with the spikes on the toe. She'd inadvertently gone for a naughty schoolgirl thing, but to Frank that seemed almost appropriate for her to wear to a school event.

Deciding to go for it full speed, she did her new blue hair in two ponytails, one on either side of her head. With her glasses, she thought she looked like she belonged in the anime version of a Britney Spears video. In Hell. It amused her, and her nervousness abated.

OOO

When Juice came to pick her up, he just stood still for a long minute, looking her over from head to toe.

Frank got insecure and defensive. "What?"

He lifted her up. Okay, this was promising. She wrapped her legs around him as he put her against the wall. She pulled her glasses off and threw them toward the futon—where, luckily, they landed.

Nuzzling her cheek, he whispered, "I'm just wondering how much time we have. 'Cuz you are *working* that little bitty plaid skirt. You have a twisted little anime thing going on. It's hot." He leaned his whole body against her and kissed her, sucking her tongue into his mouth.

He was *such* a great kisser. His lips were soft, his tongue strong and active but never overwhelming. She flexed on him, his cock a hard mound in his camo pants.

He groaned into her mouth. “We got time?”

“Whatever. Yes. Time.” She had no idea; she didn’t care. She ground against him.

He slid his hands from her ass, along her thighs, stopping to fondle the tops of her tights where they encircled each thigh. He murmured, “Oh, I like these. These are *nice*.” Taking her knees in his hands, he pulled her loose from his waist and set her back on her feet.

Frank whimpered; she wanted to be on him. She wanted him in her. She tried to climb back up, but he grinned and held her off. “Hold up, baby.” He went to his knees. Frank was so turned on she felt lightheaded. Everything between her legs was pulsing.

He wrapped his hands around her ankles and slowly slid up her legs. When he got to her hips, he hooked his fingers into her black boyshorts and pulled them down until she could kick her feet out of them. Then he whispered, “Spread your legs for me.” Watching him intently, she did as he asked. He flipped her little skirt and held it up with a hand flat on her belly. Her scars had faded to thin, faintly pink lines, and she hardly even thought about them anymore.

He kissed her Gordian knot and gave it a little nip. His mouth against her skin, he said, “I never have gotten around to asking you about this tat.”

“Do you really have to?”

He stopped and looked up at her. For several seconds, they just held the gaze. He looked suddenly somber. Then he said, “No. I guess I don’t,” and he kissed the knot again. “I love you so much, Frank.”

He slid the fingers of his free hand along her bare folds, making her gasp and relax her head on the wall. “Jesus,” he whispered. “You’re dripping. I love how you’re always so ready for me, baby.” He slid two fingers into her—her hips twitched and she looked down at him again—and then put them to his mouth and sucked. *Fuck*.

“Juice, come on. Fuck me. *Please*.”

“In a minute. I’m busy.” He leaned in and flicked the point of his tongue back and forth over her clit. He had her so hot that her nerves were already jangling all over, and at the firm contact of his tongue she cried out wordlessly and grabbed his head, holding him hard to her. He stayed on her, sucking and licking while she ground against his face, panting “ah-ah-ah-ah” on an endless loop. Then he slid his fingers into her again and started pumping, and it was over. She noisily sucked in a huge breath and arched back so hard and fast that she banged her head against the wall and her vision got all sparkly.

As she was just starting to come down, still feeling a little dizzy, Juice stood, ripped open his pants, pulled himself out, and shoved into her, lifting her up and wrapping her legs around him as he did. He went at her hard, his face against her shoulder. He'd been rougher with her lately. She didn't mind at all; it felt amazing. He never hurt her, though he'd startled her once or twice, and the intensity was hot as all hell, like he couldn't get to her fast enough or get enough of her, like he could barely control himself. Kind of a power trip, actually. She dug it, and he seemed to dig a little turnabout, too. But it was definitely different.

He mumbled, "God, baby. You're so slick. It feels *so good* to be in you. It's the only place I ever want to be." Then his teeth bit down on her shoulder through her t-shirt.

Her nerves had been settling, but they made a quick U-turn and she was climbing again. Juice had one hand on her ass as he pounded into her, claspng her cheek so hard she thought she'd probably bruise. His other hand pulled up her shirt and bra, exposing her pierced breast. At first, he just cupped the breast in his hand. She moaned and pressed deeper into the contact, her arms crossed behind his head. And then he took the ring in his fingers. Instead of pulling gently, as he usually did, he shook it.

*Holy fuck.*

It almost hurt, but it didn't. No. The sensation was so intense that Frank's whole body went tense and she screamed. He let go and put his hand on her back as she arched hard, driving herself against him. She pushed away from the wall and overbalanced them. She felt Juice scrambling to get his legs back under them, and he was able to do so just enough that they landed on the floor, him on his back, still inside her, without injury. The impact drove him deep into her, *so fucking deep*, and she screamed again as she came.

She kept coming, and she bounced and writhed and flexed on his cock, trying to extend her own peak as she brought him to his. He had his hands around her hips, his fingers biting into her flesh. He was moaning loudly with every exhale, almost growling, and then he groaned, "Fuck, baby. Yeah, that's it. Ride me. Yeah, yeah, yeahyeahyeah—" He sat upright and held her down hard on him as he yelled incoherently. Then he fell back to the floor with a thud. Frank dropped down onto his chest, and they lay there together. Smeagol came up and sniffed at them, then stalked off.

They were a little late to the show, as it turned out.

OOO

The show was pretty much what she'd expected it would be—same as every year. A couple of trays of cheap cookies. A couple of bowls of store-bought punch. Parents, friends, faculty of graduating students, wandering aimlessly, most looking bored.

This here was the pinnacle of Frank's brief, unremarkable life as an artist.

Juice made a show of looking at all the exhibits, but she knew he didn't really care. He thought her work was "awesome" and "beautiful," but art was just not up his alley. It didn't bother her. He was here. And he was being all cute and nervous in support of her.

Garrett came, of course, and he brought Marnie. Things seemed to be heating up pretty quickly between those two. Frank liked her. She looked like she'd be a doormat or a wallflower or whatever, the epitome of the nerdy woman in her late 20s who hadn't quite cast off the emotional yoke of high school. Almost everything about her was average. Her size—a few inches taller, a few more inches wider than Frank. The color and length of her straight brown hair. Medium brown eyes behind Tina Fey glasses. She had a great rack, though. She was attractive but not exactly noticeable. Until she smiled. Then you noticed her—then she was pretty. She smiled with her whole face. And if you started talking to her, you learned right quick that if she'd ever been a wallflower or a doormat, she wasn't anymore. Marnie had a caustic streak a mile wide.

Frank took credit for spending the past 6+ years prepping Zen-master Garrett to love a snarky woman like that.

When Garrett saw her outfit, his eyebrows went up. "I'm surprised, sissy. I was expecting you to wear something outrageous tonight. You practically look like a banker. First Bank of Whoville."

She brandished her spiked toe at him. "Be nice, big brother, or I'll bank my shoe in your ass."

Now that she was here, Frank wasn't nervous at all. No reason to be. No big deal. She had her guys with her. Everything was good.

She was surprised to see Lilli and Opie walking up to her, though. All university faculty were invited, but not that many from outside the department ever came. Lilli came up and kissed her cheek. Frank introduced them to Marnie and Garrett. Opie shook with Juice and Garrett and nodded at Frank with a little sideways smile. He tipped his head at Marnie. Then he stood back just a half-step or so, his head canted back a couple of degrees. She'd noticed that this was a common posture with Opie. It seemed almost protective, like he was always on the lookout. It had the effect, too, of making him look even taller, and since Frank felt like she came up to about his elbow, the last thing he needed was to seem taller.

Frank noticed that her little group was getting noticed. Around these parts, even in a room full of artistic types, her motley crew—a dude with a mohawk and big tats on his scalp, a bearded giant in a Sons kutte and a black beanie, and a chick with blue hair and spikes all over the tops of her silver platforms—was remarkable and, apparently, worrisome. Nervous glances kept aiming at them. People probably thought they were holding Garrett and Marnie against their will. Maybe Lilli, too—though she was wearing a leather jacket, badass biker chick Docs, and a black mini, so she looked pretty edgy herself. For a history professor, anyway.

They were standing in sort of a rough circle, talking aimlessly, the way people do when no one really knows everyone, but everyone is connected tangentially. Since Juice had never worn his kutte around her and just looked like a slightly edgy geek without it, Marnie was getting her first real sample of Son-ness, with Opie standing next to her. Frank caught her several times sneaking

looks, trying to take it all in. The battered boots. The heavy jeans. The long wallet chain. The huge belt buckle. The heavy rings on his fingers. The patches on the worn leather kutte.

She wondered what Marnie thought of the “Men of Mayhem” patch. Juice had just gotten one of his own, so Frank knew what it meant. To say that Juice had not been excited about the “achievement” was an understatement of epic proportions. He’d sat at his kitchen table and sewn it on, crying the whole time.

To Marnie’s credit, though, she wasn’t cowed. She started asking Opie questions and actually got him to engage in conversation. Frank was surprised; in her limited experience with him, he didn’t really come off as a talker.

When she asked Opie point blank how he kept food out of his impressively full beard, Marnie even got a grin.

So they all stood around and made conversation, eating cardboard cookies and drinking watery punch. Frank was getting antsy for it to be over, but she didn’t guess they could leave until the results of the competition had been announced.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Andre. She was hoping he’d be here—expecting him, since he was art faculty. She hadn’t seen him since their conference early in the semester. She smiled. “Andre—hi!”

He tipped his head. “Miss Duvall.” He smiled and nodded at the group around her. He didn’t seem inclined to be introduced, and that was fine with Frank. Introductions like that were awkward and cumbersome, and nobody really cared anyway.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I want to introduce you to a good friend of mine.” He indicated a small, trim, balding man in an obviously expensive grey suit. “Martin Hahn, this is the incomparable Frank Duvall.” Hahn offered her his hand, and they shook.

“Delighted to meet you, young lady. Andre speaks very highly of you. And most highly of your work.”

Andre added, “Martin owns and curates the Hahn-Friedman Gallery in San Francisco. He has expressed interest in viewing your portfolio, Miss Duvall.”

Frank didn’t understand. “I don’t understand. View my portfolio why?”

Andre gave her a patient smile. It was pretty condescending, in fact, but Frank’s brain was already several steps behind this conversation, so she didn’t think to get offended. “To consider offering a piece or two in the gallery, dear.”

Frank turned to look at Garrett and then at Juice. Garrett was about to swallow his own face, his smile was so big. Juice, though, looked to be stuck at about 75% downloaded. She felt a touch on

her arm and turned back. Martin Hahn was standing next to her now. “Will you walk with me to the piece you have here tonight?”

She nodded without replying, and then she led him to her painting.

She’d chosen to submit this piece not because she thought it was her best work. It wasn’t. But it told the story of her year. It did to her, anyway. Typically abstract, the dominant colors were red and yellow, myriad hues of each. White strands ran through it in no easily discernable pattern. A large black smear, focused right center and trailing out diagonally, became the foreground.

She’d called it “Crow Flight.”

Hahn stood with her and peered at the painting. Then he looked at her and asked, “What would you like to tell me about this piece?”

Frank just stood there at first, maintaining eye contact while she tried to decide whether this was one of those trick questions or why it even mattered if it was. She decided it didn’t matter and gave him her own, actual answer.

“Nothing I have to say should matter to you. My part in your experience of it ended when I sank my brushes in turpentine.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Doesn’t the piece have a story?”

“Sure it does. But it’s my story, my experience. Wouldn’t mean anything to you. You should be concerned with the way you experience it. If it’s good and I did what I set out to do, you have a story of your own. If it sucks, you don’t.”

His eyebrows went up even higher. “That’s a remarkably mature attitude for a young woman who is just completing her BA. Most young artists are deeply invested in explaining every molecule of their work.”

Frank shrugged. “So, do you have a story of your own?”

He smiled. “I do indeed. Would you permit me to view more of your work?”

Her brain was still playing catch-up, but it seemed like something big might be happening here. She nodded. “Sure. I don’t really understand how that works, though. I have canvases at home. I have a portfolio of sketches. I have digital photographs of the canvases. What is it I should be bringing you—or do you want me to email you the photos?”

“Would it be too much to ask to see the canvases themselves?”

“Um, sure. I could bring a few to, what? Andre’s office? The studio here?”

His smile told her that he thought she was being adorably naïve, and she decided this guy was a

dick. Her brain caught up just in time to keep her from ruining everything with an explosion of defensive snark.

“No, Miss Duvall. I would like to see *all* of your work. Might Andre and I impose upon you at your home, if that is where your work lives?”

She wasn't sure what to say. Strangers in her apartment? She hated that idea. She looked around the gallery, for no reason other than she couldn't look at Martin Hahn while she tried to work through the confusion in her head. She saw Juice, standing about ten feet away, watching this exchange. They caught eyes and held. He looked . . . scared? Why? More confusion for her head.

She remembered that there was a question hanging out there waiting for an answer. “Um . . . yeah, I guess. When?”

“I'm only in town for a couple of days, so tomorrow would be best, if at all possible. Say, 1pm?”

“Um, okay. Should I give you my address?” She still felt slow and inarticulate.

“It should be available in student records, should it not? Don't bother yourself about it. Enjoy your evening, Miss Duvall. Good luck in the show. And I'll see you tomorrow at 1pm.” He gave her a little bow and walked away.

She turned and stared at her painting without seeing it. Juice walked up to her side and put his hand on the small of her back. “Baby? You okay? What was that about?”

She spoke without turning. “That guy has a gallery in San Francisco. He's considering offering one of my pieces. He wants to come to the apartment tomorrow to see the canvases.”

“San Francisco, huh? That's . . . great, baby. So great.”

She started to grin. She turned to Juice. He still looked nervous somehow, but as her grin grew, he started a smile of his own. He hugged her, and they went hand in hand back to their group, all of whom were watching with obvious curiosity. When she explained what that had been about, Garrett *whooped* and swept her up and swung her around. Garrett. In public, right in the middle of the gallery. He was acting so weird lately, but still, that was *awesome*.

She almost didn't care when “Crow Flight” won the show's grand prize. Almost.

OOO

Juice was quiet as Frank drove them back to her apartment. They'd taken her Gremlin to the show because she wasn't dressed to ride. She was quiet, too. She had a lot to think about, and she assumed that he was letting her do that.

She kissed him when they got upstairs. He kissed her back, folding her close to him. He pulled away and looked down at her. “I love you, baby. You know that, right? You're everything to me.”

She smiled. Again with the weirdness. What the fuck was *up* with everybody? “I know you do, doof. I love you, too. So much. What’s with the heavy, though? You okay?”

He kissed her forehead. “Everything’s good. You had a good night, huh? I’m really proud of you, Frank. You’re amazing.”

She tried to wrap herself around him, but he held her off. “You have a big day tomorrow. You probably have a lot to do to get your stuff ready for that gallery guy. I’m going to go on home tonight, I think.”

Well, that sucked. Not at all how she wanted to end her big night. “But I want to get you naked and have my way.” She put her hands under his t-shirt and scratched his belly, the way he liked. “I’ll leave the tights on,” she cajoled.

He grabbed her hands gently and moved away. “Another night, for sure. You should focus on your art right now.” He kissed her chastely. “I’ll call you in the morning. I really love you, baby.”

He turned toward the door. Frank had no idea what the holy fuck was going on, but *no*. He was not leaving, goddammit. She stomped her foot and yelled, “Hey, asshole!”

He stopped and faced her, brow furrowed. He didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you leave until you tell me what the fuck is your malfunction. You’ve been maxi-weird ever since Martin Whozits looked at my painting. What? *What?*?”

He just stood there, and then—oh, Jesus, he was *crying*. She went to him and put her hands on his face. “Juice! What the fuck is wrong?!”

He pulled her close and hugged her tight. When he pulled back, he twirled one of her ponytails in his hand. He smiled through his tears and said, “I just—you’re going to leave Charming. I realized that tonight.”

Well, that was crazy. “What? No! Why would I? Garrett’s here. The shop’s here. *You’re* here. My life is here. Why would I leave?”

“To be an artist somewhere people care about that. Like San Francisco.”

*Geez, dude. Overreact much?* “That guy just wants to *maybe* put one of my paintings in his gallery. My *painting* might go to San Francisco, not me. Except, you know, maybe to drive the *painting* there. Unless he’ll want me to ship it. I don’t know how that works. If he even wants one. *Anyway*, you’re a big fucking doofus crybaby. I’m not going anywhere. *I’m with you*. I love you. Asshole.”

He leaned down and kissed her, and she held him close and kissed him hard. She led him to the futon; he wasn’t going anywhere, either.



## CHAPTER 17:

“Welcome to Paradise,” Green Day

“Apart,” The Cure

“Something I Can Never Have,” Nine Inch Nails

Juice was stretched out on his side, resting on his elbow, his head propped on his hand, watching Frank as she slept next to him. She was curled into a ball as usual, her legs pulled up tight to her chest, the curve of her lower back tucked against his belly. Her hair was loose and flowed over the pillows and over her shoulder. He combed his fingers from her temple, sweeping the azure strands back from her shoulder, closing his eyes at the feel of it brushing his chest. It was strong and silky despite all the chemicals she used to make it Crayola colors.

Martin Hahn had selected two of her paintings for his gallery. She’d crated them and shipped them at his expense the very same day he’d been to her apartment. Juice had brought the club van over to help her get them to FedEx. She’d laughed and said, “See? I’m not even going to San Francisco for a *visit*. I’m with you, doof.”

He wasn’t convinced. He believed her; he didn’t think she was lying. But he’d seen with clarity at the college art show that Frank was meant for a bigger, better life than the one Charming could give her. The one he could give her.

Now that he’d started to think about it, the signs had been there before the show. From the first, really. Every time he saw people in Charming react to the way she looked; every time he’d thought about how well she’d fit in in the East Village; or how different, how happy and light, she’d been both times they’d been to Desi’s—all of it, seen through his newly clear eyes, showed him that Frank was a Charming short-timer, even though she didn’t see it herself. Yet.

Part of him was glad. Her past in Charming was filled with pain, her present, thanks to him, surrounded by violence. In Charming, she was stuck, a little like Garrett was stuck in that house. She would thrive and flourish away from here. Away from him.

He didn’t know what he’d do without her, but he shoved all that in his brain’s back closet for now. He would keep her as long as she’d have him, and he’d let her go when she was ready. He would love her the way she deserved to be loved.

He lay back down and pulled her close.

OOO

It had taken some time, mainly because things were continuing to go haywire with the club, and Kozik had been killed in a bloody confrontation between the Galindo and Lobo cartels, but Juice had tracked down all five of Jordan Elster’s rape buddies. Charming not being a land of opportunity, three had enlisted together after graduation and were out of reach. One was dead, another at Walter Reed Hospital, missing his right leg and arm and a goodly portion of his skull. Juice figured karma had taken care of them just fine. The third was deployed in Afghanistan. Juice put a pin in that one—he’d remember him if he returned to Charming.

The other two were more or less local: one worked at an auto parts shop in Galt, and the other (the only “fat fuck” of the group; Juice had almost as much bloodlust for him as he’d had for Elster) was in college in Hayward. The Galt guy suffered a bit less than Elster or the fat fuck, but Happy ended their business with two more ears.

OOO

Fat Fuck was the last to be dealt with. Juice brought both IDs to Level Up a couple of days later. Garrett had been unprepared at first for the reality that Juice meant to kill these guys, and to do it hard. When he had brought him Elster’s ID and the reality had become real, Juice thought Garrett would be sick. But he pulled it together, and when Frank interrupted them, he was back on board. Juice saw it happen. Garrett had been arguing hard against going after the rest of them. But then Frank walked smiling onto the floor, and Juice saw her brother’s heart harden toward those who had hurt her.

When Juice brought the last two IDs to tell Garrett that the job was done—or as done as it could be—he had to wait awhile. Frank was on the floor, too. So he just hung out with his girl and his friend for awhile. His favorite thing to do. Well, second favorite thing. Maybe third.

There was a big poker game that night at the clubhouse, but poker wasn’t Juice’s game. He had about a hundred tells and couldn’t read anyone else’s. He might as well just hand over his wallet. He’d much rather be talking comics and blasting zombies with Frank and Garrett.

Frank went into the back room for some stock, and Juice pulled the IDs out and showed them to Garrett. Garrett took them, disgust and anger plain on his face. He nodded and handed them back. “Is it done?”

“One guy’s deployed in Afghanistan, but otherwise, it’s done, yeah.”

Garrett nodded again and turned away, back to his work. “Good.”

OOO

Juice and Frank were on the couch in the back room a while later, making out. He was lying mostly on her, his hand down her jeans, his fingers teasing under the leg of her underwear. She had her hands on his bare back, under his t-shirt, scratching. The feeling of her blunt nails grazing so lightly across his skin drove him crazy, and he thrust his hips against her. They moaned into each other’s mouths as they kissed.

“Aw, man. Would you two *stop* doing that shit on the couch? Other people sit there, you know. It’s disgusting.” Garrett had apparently come into the room.

Juice laughed against Frank’s lips and looked up. “Sorry, man.” He pulled his hand out of her jeans.

Garrett saw that. He cringed. “Jesus. Way too much information. Get off my little sister, Juice.”

The prepay went off, and Juice kissed Frank’s nose and stood to fetch the phone from his pocket. It was Tig. Strange—Tig didn’t usually call him. Tig didn’t really like him, brother or not.

“Tig—what’s up?”

“Gotta get here, brother. Club’s been shot up.”

“Fuck! On my way.” He closed the phone.

Frank and Garrett were both standing, watching him. Frank put her hand on his arm. “Juice?”

“I have to go. There’s trouble at the clubhouse.” He looked at Frank, then at Garrett. “Do me a favor. Stay here. Stay together. I’ll let you know more when I can.”

They all walked out onto the floor together. The shop was empty of customers. Juice pulled Frank into his arms and kissed her, loving the feel of her arms looped around his neck. “I love you, baby. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Love you. Be safe.”

Juice walked through the store. He looked back and smiled as he opened the door and went out.

As he was crossing to his bike, a green pickup screamed down the street. On reflex, Juice turned and tore back toward Frank and Garrett as several men stood up in the bed of the truck and started firing automatic weapons into Clear Passages. Three gunmen saw Juice and turned their fire toward him.

He threw the door open and shouted “GET DOWN!” just as bullets began to rip through the windows of the shop. Juice hit Frank full on and brought her down, covering her entirely with his body.

They must have stopped the truck in the middle of the street, because the thunder of the guns and the rain of bullets went on for a full minute or more. It seemed endless to Juice. Frank was still and silent underneath him, and he lifted his head a little to see her face. Her eyes were scared, but he thought she looked okay. *Thank you, God.*

When the bullets stopped and the truck screamed away, Juice lay still for a few more seconds, making sure. Then he leaned up on an elbow and looked Frank over. “Fuck! You okay, baby?”

She pushed at him to get him off her. “Yeah, I’m okay. You?” They stood and brushed themselves off.

Juice didn’t see her brother. “Garrett? You whole?” No answer. He looked at Frank. Her eyes were huge.

She tried. “Garry? Are you hurt?” Nothing.

They found him by the new PS3 games, which were strewn across the floor. He was lying face down, a pool of blood widening in the carpet around him. Juice counted three holes in his back. He checked his pulse—it was there, but it was faint.

Frank knocked Juice away with a strength he would have thought impossible and dove to her brother’s side, her knees landing in the pool, the blood already so deep it oozed up at the impact. “GARRY! GARRY! GET UP! NONONONONONONO!”

She tried to turn him over, but Juice grabbed her. He’d helped Chibs and Tara enough to know a few things. One of the holes was right in the middle of Garrett’s back, and he couldn’t tell if all three bullets had gone straight through. At least one had, probably at least two, considering the amount of blood his friend was losing. But if one was lodged near his spine . . .

“No, baby—you don’t want to hurt him more.”

She shook him off violently and turned on him a look of such rage and hate his heart stuttered. She screamed, “*GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HIM! GET AWAY FROM US! JUST GET AWAY! GET AWAY GET AWAY GET AWAY!*” Then she just screamed.

He swallowed and staggered back, pain surging through him that had nothing to do with his physical body. But he didn’t have time to feel it now. He needed to get Garrett some help. He opened the phone and dialed 911. When he had an ambulance on his way, he called Jax.

Then he sat back and watched the girl he loved with everything he had turn away from him to wrap herself around her motionless brother and weep.

OOO

Juice followed the ambulance to the hospital. Garrett was rushed into surgery immediately, and Frank was left standing outside the doors, covered in his blood. Juice went to her.

“Frank. Baby, please.” He put his hand on the back of her neck, preparing to pull her into his embrace.

She knocked his hand away and wrapped her arms around her chest. “Get. The fuck. Out. Now. We don’t want you here.”

It was like she’d punched him in the chest. She had, in a manner of speaking. He felt tears coming, and he didn’t get in their way. “God, baby, I’m so sorry. I love you. I love Garrett. What can I do?”

She stared at him. Her face was stained with blood and tears. Grief swelled in her beautiful eyes, but there was no love in them for him at all. They were empty of him. “You can stay the fuck away from us.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll go. I hope he’s okay. I love you,” he whispered. And then he walked away.

OOO

He knelt under a tree near the spot where his life had become irredeemable. Miles was buried nearby. He prayed. He prayed for Miles, for Garrett, for Frank. He said an Act of Contrition.

*O my God  
I am heartily sorry for  
having offended Thee,  
and I detest all my sins,  
because of Thy just punishments,  
but most of all because  
they offend Thee, my God,  
Who art all good and  
deserving of all my love.*

He was surprised he still remembered it, but thirteen years of Catholic school had deeply etched the words for all the rituals. Then he gathered up the tow chain from the T-M truck and climbed the tree.

He wrapped one end of the chain around a thick branch, over and over, making sure it would hold fast. Then he wrapped the other end around his neck. He took a moment and thought of Frank, trying to imagine her with as much detail as possible. Not the Frank who’d looked at him today with so much fury and hatred, not the Frank he’d hurt again and again, but the Frank who loved him and trusted him. Frank when she was happy, when he’d made her happy, her blue eyes brilliant with love for him.

Once that image was so clear in his head he thought his heart would burst, he jumped off the branch.

## CHAPTER 18:

“Dead Souls,” Joy Division

“I Don’t Need a Hero,” Concrete Blonde

*The room was too bright, too noisy. It should be dark and quiet, so he could rest. How could he get better in this bright, brassy chaos, with machines whirring and beeping, people running about, yammering and yammering?*

Frank sat in a chair next to Garrett’s bed, curled tightly into herself. Marnie was in the room, too, but she understood that she was not yet nearly deep enough in Garrett’s life to supplant the sister he’d raised, and she sat back near the door.

Garrett was unconscious, but breathing on his own, which was a small miracle. He had a tube in his chest, draining fluid. One of the bullets had nicked a lung on its way through his body. Another had passed through his stomach. The third had lodged in the muscle against his spine. Had Frank succeeded in rolling him over, he might well have been paralyzed.

As it was, though, the doctors told Frank that surgery seemed to have successfully repaired all the damage, though they would not know for sure whether there was any lasting spinal damage until he was conscious. He’d woken briefly in recovery, and they’d told her that his deep sleep now was just that—sleep, its depth the result of the pain meds. Not a coma. His prognosis was excellent, she’d been told, and they expected to keep him in the ICU for only a day or two.

He was incredibly lucky, they’d told her. Lucky. To have been shot three times in the back.

It was her fault. She’d brought Juice into their lives, and Juice brought death and violence. He’d warned her, of course, and she’d told him she was all in anyway. She hadn’t thought about how she was dragging Garrett in with her.

She hadn’t thought. She’d been thoughtless. Selfish. As per usual. And now Garrett, the one person in her life who’d never, ever let her down, who’d never, ever left her, who took care of her and loved her and made her strong, her big brother, was lying unconscious in the chaos of the fucking St. Thomas ICU.

She tightened her arms even more around her legs. She pressed her face against her thighs and cried. She had almost seven years of tears stored up; Garrett was getting every drop.

OOO

He woke a few hours later and groaned. Frank unwound herself from the chair and leapt to his side, grabbing his hand and holding it to her face. “Garrett? Hey, you. I love you. I love you so much. I’m so sorry. God, Garry, I’m so sorry.”

He smiled weakly at her. “Hey, Frenchie.” Her heart clenched at that damn name, but she didn’t say anything. She just smiled back at him, feeling her tears trickle past her lips. His voice was hoarse and little more than whisper. “Are you crying, sis? What happened? Are you okay?”

Typical. “I’m fine, Garry. You’re the one who’s hurt, idiot. You got shot.”

He looked confused; his brow furrowed, and then it smoothed out. “Right—the windows. Is Juice okay?” He closed his eyes for a couple of seconds.

Frank worried that he was too weak for a big conversation right now, and she didn’t want to talk about Juice. “I guess. I’m so sorry, Garry. So, so sorry.”

“Why, sissy? You didn’t shoot me, did you?” He tried to chuckle, but it clearly hurt too much.

She was crying so hard. It was like she’d spent so many years not crying that she’d forgotten how to stop. “It’s my fault. I brought Juice and the Sons, and now look at you.” She dropped her head to the mattress and just bawled.

He squeezed her hand hard. “Frank, where’s Juice?” His voice, though still weak, was suddenly clear and focused.

“I don’t know. I told him we didn’t want him. We don’t need him—this—in our life. He went away.”

He tried to sit up but couldn’t. Just then a nurse came in to check on him. She checked his vitals. When he asked, she raised the head of his bed a couple of inches.

While the nurse was fussing, Frank noticed that Marnie wasn’t in the room anymore. She stepped out to check the hallway and found her there, sitting on one of a row of chairs near the nurses’ station.

“He’s awake.”

Marnie smiled. “I know. I’m so glad.”

“You want to see him?” Frank didn’t want to share him, but she knew that was stupid. Garrett really liked Marnie.

“Not right now. I’ll wait a bit. You two need some time first. I’ll be right here.”

Frank decided right then that Marnie was a keeper. She leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You’re pretty awesome, Marn. Thank you.” She went back to her brother.

He was sitting up a bit more and looking slightly more alert, though pale and weak and obviously exhausted and in pain. The nurse was injecting something into his IV.

When she left, he patted the bed next to his hip. “Come here, sissy.” Frank sat gently down on the bed, careful not to jostle him.

“This isn’t Juice’s fault. It’s not your fault. Don’t be stupid, sissy. Please. He loves you so much.” He closed his eyes, a long blink, and tried to take a deeper breath, wincing as he did. When he spoke again, his voice was slower, less clear. “He would do anything for you. *Anything*. You have no idea what he’s already done for you.”

She had no idea what that even meant. She cocked her head. “What’s that supposed to mean, Garry?”

His eyes were drooping. “He got Jordan and those guys for you.” He shook his head and forced his eyes open. “Um, what did she give. . . not supposed . . . never mind . . .” He was asleep.

Frank had stopped breathing at the word “Jordan.”

OOO

Frank pulled Elwood into the driveway and cut the engine. She didn’t usually park in the driveway, because the Bendersons didn’t like the garage blocked, but they were visiting their grandkids somewhere. Plus, it was late, and she was tired. She was too fucking tired even to walk up from the street. She felt too tired even to get out of the car.

Garrett was going to be fine. Other than some twinginess and tingliness that the doctor expected to pass once the injury itself had healed, there was no discernable spinal or nerve damage. He’d be in the hospital for several days, but they were making arrangements to move him into a regular room in the morning. He probably wouldn’t even miss her graduation.

He’d sent her home to rest. He was pretty obnoxious and bossy about it, in fact. But she was so tired, and so mentally fucked, that when Marnie said she’d stay, Frank stopped fighting.

When Garrett woke up after dropping that huge pile of shit on her head, he had no memory of telling her. She’d spent those few hours in a daze, working hard not to let Marnie know anything was wrong.

When she’d seen that her brother was awake and unaware of her turmoil, she’d thought for about a nanosecond of letting it drop—he was in no condition to deal with the drama she was feeling—but she couldn’t. She’d asked Marnie to leave and had made him tell her exactly what he knew about what had happened to her, and about what Juice had done.

He looked miserable and guilty, but he told her. Then she’d gone into the bathroom and puked for, oh, about a week or so. When she came back, he was crying. He was sorry for knowing now. He was sorry for not knowing then, not being able to help her. It was hurting him to cry, so she pulled herself together and pretended to be okay for him. She was actually relieved to get out of the hospital. Her brain felt like it had been electrocuted.

She’d gone by the shop to assess the damage. Someone had boarded up the windows. She went in, and all the stock was gone from the sales floor. Her stomach dropped, but when she went into

the back room—the door was locked, which it never was—she saw that it had all been boxed and stacked back there. Is that something cops did? Or did they have a good fairy? Maybe elves?

Too tired to think about it. So she just went home.

She got out and dragged her ass to the stairs. She looked up, psyching herself up for the climb, and stopped short. Juice was sitting on the top step, waiting for her. Blocking her access to her own fucking door.

She considered just turning around and going back to Elwood, maybe sleeping in the shop. But Smeagol needed to eat, and she wanted her own fucking bed. Fine, he wanted this fight, they'd have it. Because she couldn't think of anybody she hated like she hated Juan Carlos Ortiz. Not anybody still living, anyway.

He stood as she climbed the stairs. She pushed past him and unlocked the door. At least he hadn't let himself in. She opened it and looked at him. She went in without a word, but she left the door open. She switched on the track lighting.

He followed her in and closed the door. He didn't say anything. Before she turned around to face him, she figured out what she was going to say, because she had every intention of ripping his deceitful, betraying throat out. Metaphorically speaking. Probably.

She turned, and everything she was going to say died in her head. His throat was a mess, abraded and deeply bruised. Instead of screaming at him, she went up to him and lifted her hand to his throat. "Juice—what the fuck happened?"

He flinched away. "Doesn't matter." His voice was weak and rough.

But she knew. Jesus, she knew. She took a step back. Now she didn't know what she felt. Rage, yes. Betrayal, for sure. Pain, yep. But now she was also worried about him, dammit. "God. Why?"

He shook his head. "I said it doesn't matter. It's not why I'm here."

Okay, then. "Why *are* you here?"

"Is Garrett okay?"

"He's going to be. The doctors say he'll be fine." She could see the relief pass through his body. "You could have called to ask me that."

"Would you have picked up?"

She didn't say anything. No, she wouldn't have. Especially not after today.

"I know you hate me, ba—Frank. I know. I deserve it. I never want to hurt you, but I keep doing it. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone, but I know you need me to be out of your life."

His voice cracked, and he stopped for a minute, his head down. They were still just standing there in the middle of her apartment. “I’m not going to bother you after tonight. But all the secrets I have are killing me, and I need to come clean with someone. I need to tell you the truth. You can do whatever you want with it, but I can’t deal with this by myself anymore.”

“You sound like you’re asking me to hear your fucking confession.”

He looked at her. “I guess I am.”

“There’s no absolution for you here, asshole. I know that you told Garrett about Jordan and his friends. And I know you—what you did to them.”

Juice sat so hard on the floor she wasn’t sure whether he’d done it intentionally or if his legs had just given out. He put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. “I’m sorry, Frank. Telling Garrett was an accident. I never meant to tell him.”

“Yeah, of course. Sure. Like, ‘Hey, Garrett, has the new *Hellblazer* come in yet? That reminds me of the time your sister was gang raped—oopsie daisies, forget I said that! Haha!’ Is that how you *accidentally* betray a secret like that?”

“I’m just so sorry.” He looked up at her. “For telling Garrett. I’m not sorry for what I did to them. They hurt you. I will *never* walk away from that. *Ever*.”

She didn’t think she was sorry about that either. She’d told herself all these years that it didn’t matter, that she had overcome it, that they’d stopped being able to hurt her when she’d gotten herself out of that awful basement, swollen and sore, her underwear in her hand. And it was mostly true. But it had changed her, she knew that. It had been so fucking hard to deal with by herself, and she wasn’t sure she done such a bang-up job.

She hadn’t one single fucking tear, though. Not one. Not until today.

She also knew that while she was in the bathroom in Garrett’s hospital room crying and puking up the meager contents of her stomach, and then dry heaving over and over, hating *so much* that her big brother had that image of her in his head now for the rest of time, a tide of satisfied vengeance was rising in the back of her head. She hoped they’d suffered. She hoped they’d known why they were dying. It made her sick to feel that way, and she’d hurled some more, but she felt it anyway.

She sat down on the floor next to Juice. God, she was tired. “You’re a killer.”

“Yeah, I am.” He said it without affect, as if she’d said, “You’re a guy.” “There’s more I need to tell you, if you’ll let me.” Smeagol walked up then and stepped into Juice’s lap, shoving his fat orange head under Juice’s hand, demanding a petting.

Frank watched her suspicious, fearful cat getting orgasmic over Juice's caress. She watched Juice rub his hands gently over the fur without recognizing that it was the first time Smeagol had let him touch him for any length of time. There was something significant here, something she was trying, in her anger and exhaustion, to push away from her consciousness. It came anyway: they were almost like a weird little family, sitting here together on the floor.

She sighed and closed her eyes for a few seconds, trying to regroup. What did she want here? What was the right thing?

"Garrett says I'm stupid for making you go away. But I don't know how to deal with you telling him about what happened to me, making him live with that—making him think of that when he thinks of me. God, Juice, it's like the worst thing you could do."

Juice just watched Smeagol rubbing against his hand and nodded.

She went on. "And I don't know how to deal with what happened yesterday, or with the thought that it could happen again. That it probably *will* happen again, or something like it. If I'd been hurt, it wouldn't matter. I signed up for this. But Garrett didn't, and he's the one getting fucked up because of you. Because of us."

"Ba—Frank, I'm so fucking sorry about Garrett. I love him like a brother. I don't want him hurt, either." He was quiet, and then, "There's one other thing I need to say. I was going to tell you about what Garrett knew and what I'd done to those guys, but there's one other thing. Then I'll leave and stay away, if that's what you want. Okay?"

She nodded. She couldn't imagine anything worse than what she already knew.

And it wasn't worse—at least, it wasn't to her. But for him—Jesus Christ. When he was done, she knew that the Feds had been hounding him for months, making him rat on the club and the cartel, and she knew how Miles had been killed. She wasn't angry anymore. Her rage had evaporated while he spoke. These months must have been so hard for him. How scared he must have been, how exhausted. And yet, he'd loved her and dealt with her tantrums and selfish crap all that time without letting on that he was going through it. Not so she noticed, anyway. But she was a self-centered asshole.

She was so damn confused. Garrett knowing about Jordan and his friends felt almost like it was happening all over again. It made her ill to imagine her brother thinking of her like that, and it was pretty much all she'd been imagining all day. That horrible thing she'd locked in the past where it couldn't hurt her was ripping her apart again. Juice had done that. She'd trusted him, and he'd shat on her trust. She didn't know where to go with that.

But, goddammit, she loved him. Even now, even with Garrett shot and her worst thing exposed, and all of that because of Juice, she loved him. He was hurting—Jesus, he tried to fucking kill himself!—and she wanted to hold him and help him and make him feel better. How the fuck did that work?

She had no idea; the best thing she could think of was to play it through, step by step.

He was curled into himself, crying. His tears fell on Smeagol, and the fair-weather cat bolted, shaking his head. She scooted closer to Juice and put her arms around him, her head against his. “I’m sorry you’ve gone through that on your own. I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

At her touch and her words, Juice relaxed in a rush, crying harder and opening his arms to clutch her close. “God, baby, I’m so fucked up. Everything I do is wrong. Everything thing I am is wrong. I’m just so *wrong*. I don’t know how to make anything right. I don’t know how to be right with anything. I just want to be right. Tell me how I can do it. Please, baby, please help me.”

He was holding her so tight he was hurting her. She pushed him away a little, just enough to ease the pressure, and so she could see him. She put her hands around his face, wrenched with pain. It hurt her heart to see him suffer. She kissed him. He dropped his head, and she kissed his mohawk and pulled his face back up to hers. “I don’t know how to do any of this. I have no idea. All I ever do is feel and react. I don’t know what’s right. I’m so tired and confused. But I love you. Maybe we can’t be right alone. Maybe we have to do it together. Make each other right.”

He peered into her eyes. He looked desperate. “I can’t be without you, baby.”

“You’re not. I’m here. We’ll work it out. Always forward, remember?”

He grabbed her head and crushed his lips on hers. At first it was just that, lips pressed hard to lips; neither of them moved at all. Then his tongue was pushing against her mouth. She opened to him, and he pushed her hard down on the floor, covering her with his body, his hands grabbing at her clothes, tearing at them.

This was maybe a little too rough. It didn’t hurt, but he was off the rails. Then one of his rings scraped up her side as he pawed at her top. Okay, *that* hurt. She was pretty sure that drew blood. She tore her mouth away and gasped, “Ow—Juice.”

He was kissing and licking and biting at her neck, his hands grabbing at her, hard. His hips rocked against her. When she spoke, he started whispering feverishly, “God, I love you so fucking much, baby. I need you so much. Need to feel you. I need it. Fuck, I need it. I need it so bad.”

She didn’t much like that “it” at all. Like he wasn’t really *with* her. She grabbed his head in her hands and pulled him away. She didn’t think he was even seeing her. “Hey. Look at me. Be with me. Please.” His eyes refocused, and he reared back, out of her arms.

“Jesus. I’m an animal. I—I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Come back.” She stood up and held her hands out to him. After a second, he took them and stood. She walked him to the futon.

She stood in front of him and stripped, not making a show of it, but letting him watch her get naked for him. She'd been so angry, so sure she wanted him out of her life. She could still feel the wound of his betrayal aching inside her. But now mostly what she felt was compassion, love. She wanted to take care of him. Her emotions were definitely free range. They confused the shit out of her. They wore her out.

When she was bare, he dropped to his knees before her, and she put her hands on his head, scratching his scalp lightly. She felt him tracing the lines over her belly, and she looked down. He hadn't done that since she'd asked him not to the first night they were really together. They'd faded so much in the months since that she'd come to hope they'd go away completely. She didn't really think about them much; she didn't like to think about them or how she'd gotten them. But this time she let him trace the scars. Then she let him kiss them.

Then he saw the new scratch up her side. He had drawn blood—not much, just beads of it along the open skin. He put his fingers to it gently, and looked at the blood that came away. He sucked his fingers. Then he leaned in and kissed the scratch.

Then he *licked* the scratch, bottom to top. Huh. Okay, weird. Stung a little. But sweet and intimate, too. A little sexy, maybe.

He looked up at her. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I never want to. I just want you to be happy and safe.”

“I know.” She pulled on his shoulders a little to bring him back to his feet. “I’m all naked here and you’re not. That seem fair to you?”

He stripped. The scar on his thigh from where he'd been shot was a straight pink line, almost parallel with the floor. He had such an amazing body. Every muscle defined exactly right—not too big and veiny, just firm and cut. Broad of shoulder and narrow of hip. She never tired of the feel of her hands moving over the rises and ridges of his form. She loved that he shaved, too. It made him look and feel almost like a marble statue—or a bronze, more like, with his Latin coloring.

And his cock. She'd seen her share of flaccid versions—a semester of Life Drawing, another of Advanced, lots of floppy parts around. She'd hadn't seen many erect, though. At any rate, she'd never been impressed. The female body was beautiful from every angle. From a design perspective, though, she thought the human penis was all function and no form. She had a much greater aesthetic appreciation of breasts and vaginas.

But Juice's cock was beautiful, long and thick, smooth and bronze. Sometimes while he slept she'd pull the covers back to study it. She could never resist touching it, and she loved to watch it swell and rise from the smooth, bare skin of his pelvis. And then, well. Juice had woken up more than once inside her one way or another. He didn't seem to have a problem with that at all.

Now his cock was fully erect, and she took it in her hand and pulled him to her. He wrapped his arms around her, gently, and leaned down to kiss her, moving his lips silkily across hers. *This* is what they needed now. She stepped back and lowered onto the futon, scooting to the middle and

spreading her legs for him. He put his knee down and crawled over her, keeping his body off of hers, looming over her, looking down at her.

She slid her feet up his legs and over his hips, linking her ankles against his back and pulling him down to lie on her. She loved the feeling of him pressed to her like this. He was propped on his elbows, his fingers playing in her hair. She pressed her hands to his back, trying to bring him down to kiss her, but he held back.

“Loving you is the best thing I’ve ever done. It might be the only right thing I’ve ever done. Whatever happens, that’s real.”

She brought a hand to his face and traced his lips, his cheekbones, his brow. “I’ve never loved anyone like this. I’m not very good at it. I’m sorry.” she whispered. He closed his eyes and turned into her hand. She slid her hand over his jaw, trailing down to his throat, so hurt and raw. She pressed her fingers to her lips and then touched the swollen, tender skin gently. He flinched away a bit, more in shame than pain. She slid her hand around his head, bringing him finally down for a kiss.

The kiss was sweet and light, but Frank needed more. She needed Juice to fill her up, make her feel something good. Now that she’d gotten his attention, he seemed afraid to let things intensify. So she took matters into her own hand, reaching down to hold him, canting her hips up and pressing him against her core. He gasped and groaned, his lips still on hers, and then she flexed her legs and brought him into her. She felt his whole body tense, and then he pushed in as far as he could. She closed her eyes and savored the feel of him filling her, stretching her. He deepened their kiss, pushing his tongue into her mouth, sliding back and forth over her stud.

He pulled back. When she opened her eyes, she saw him staring at her. He caught and held her eyes. And then he began to move.

## CHAPTER 19:

“One Step Closer,” U2

“Pump It Up,” Elvis Costello

The Sons cleaned up their messes. They were hard at work fixing up Clear Passages and Level Up, just as they were fixing up the clubhouse, after the Lobo attack—which is what it had been. The cartel war tearing up Charming.

Sons had been streaming into St. Thomas to pay their respects to Garrett, too. Garrett had been shocked, Frank had been surprised, and Marnie had been curious, but Sons step up. Garrett had gotten caught in their crossfire; he was their responsibility. Because Frank was Juice’s girl and Garrett was her brother, he was also extended family.

Frank was not an old lady, not officially, though Gemma had a surprising soft spot for her and was actively lobbying for things to get more permanent between them. But Frank resisted the hell out of that label; she wasn’t interested in clubhouse status, and she didn’t want anyone calling her an old lady. Juice thought she was too young for it, anyway. Hell, he thought *he* was too young for it, and he had more than seven years on her. She was the only one for him, but she was just his girl. It was thus unusual for the club to have embraced her the way it had. But Frank and Garrett had gotten caught up in club violence, and for the Sons that formed a bond.

The club was taking care of repairs and restocking, and overhead for the time the shop was down was covered, too, however long that would be. It wasn’t entirely altruistic, of course. Avoiding the investigation that came with insurance claims, rebuilding trust and good will—it helped the Sons do their thing.

Rat, Phil, Happy, and Chibs had come into Level Up after the cops had cleared out. They’d boarded up the destroyed windows and stored the stock in the back for safekeeping. And now Rat and Phil were helping Juice and Frank get the shop up and running again. Happy had been there overseeing the installation of the new window glass.

When he’d come up to Frank and squeezed her shoulder, asking “How you doin’, little girl?” Juice had tensed. That’s the one thing he’d held back. Not even Garrett knew that Happy had helped deal with Elster and his friends. Frank didn’t need to know that even one Son besides him knew. Hap would never tell—once he had a secret he died with it—but putting his hand on her in that paternal way was *so* out of character for him . . . if Frank had known him better, things could have gotten awkward in a hurry. Luckily, she didn’t know him well yet and had no way of knowing what a huge tell that moment was.

He and Frank were working it out. They were both fucking messes, but he thought they were working it out. She didn’t completely trust him anymore, he could feel that. He wasn’t sure she’d ever come to terms with Garrett knowing, and that would always be his fault. But she was with him, she was still in, and she’d been a lot less combative since the night after the tree branch broke. He was almost sorry not to fight, though. It was like she was holding something back from him.

She'd stopped calling him "doof." That seemed important.

A lot of her attention was focused on Garrett. It seemed like what had happened to her brother might tie her more tightly to Charming. Juice was glad. He knew he shouldn't be, he shouldn't want her trapped here, but he needed her, needed time to gain her trust again. He couldn't find it in himself to feel bad that something besides his need might keep her with him.

For his part, Garrett was apparently glad Juice was still around. Juice found that surprising. The one thing Garrett had asked was to keep his sister safe, and he clearly wasn't going to be able to do that. But he and Garrett were close themselves; maybe that bought him some extra patience.

It was a big week. Garrett was being released tomorrow, though he'd be in a wheelchair for a little while. Frank was graduating on Saturday morning, and Gemma had a bash planned for that night. College graduations just didn't happen in SAMCRO, and everybody thought it was a big deal. So Frank was getting a blowout whether she wanted one or not.

Juice looked around the shop. He was a lot more invested in getting Level Up going again than the weed shop, but his partners over there had that covered, anyway, and Clear Passages would be up in a couple of days. He figured they had another week or so before Level Up would be good to go, and Frank would need help running it until Garrett was ready to come back in. She'd get it. They'd figure it out. Sons step up.

Frank and Rat were stocking gaming systems. Phil was installing new wall shelving. Hap had gone over to Clear Passages to check on the window installation there. Juice went to the back room for another box of comics. As he went to grab a box, he felt a sharp pull on his back belt loop. He looked around to see Frank yanking on him.

He turned around. "Baby?"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the side of the room, back between two tall stacks of boxes. She pushed him against the wall. "Frank, what—" She undid his belt and knelt in front of him. *Fuck*. She opened his fly and pulled him out over his boxers. She still hadn't said anything.

He'd hardened as soon as she'd pushed him between the stacks. When she took him in both hands and sucked him into her mouth, he hissed and tipped his head back against the wall. She worked him hard and fast, her hands squeezing him, her studded tongue moving all over him as she pistoned him in and out of her mouth, sucking almost constantly. *Fuck!* He heard himself rhythmically grunting, and he knew he should be quiet. The door to the sales floor was open, and Rat and Phil were right out there. But he couldn't shut up.

Phil walked in. "Hey, Frank, are there more—" He looked over and made eye contact over the stack of boxes with Juice, who even now could only close his mouth on his grunts. Still Frank didn't stop, and Jesus Christ, he was going to go off right now, with Phil looking at him. He closed his eyes. At least he wouldn't have to see Phil see this.

And he came, folding over at the waist, grabbing her head and holding her to him, spasming hard. She stayed on him, swallowing and still sucking, making him twitch and shiver until he was too sensitive to take it any more, and he pulled her off him. She stood up, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and walked out of the stacks of boxes, around Phil (who was frozen to the spot), back out to the front. She'd never said a word.

He had no earthly idea what that was all about.

OOO

Frank had painted a neon pink anarchy symbol on her mortarboard, so she was easy to spot. And they had pretty decent seats, anyway. Juice kept his eyes on her the whole time. She had dyed her hair in school colors, black with purple tips, and he watched that tail sweep back and forth across her back as she took in her surroundings.

Marnie was sitting to his right, on the end of the row. Garrett, in a wheelchair, was parked next to her. He had feeling and movement in his legs, but he had some tingling and weakness. The doctors expected him to make a full recovery, but he had some healing yet to do. His spirits were high, though, his mellow nature intact, and he treated Juice like nothing bad had happened. Garrett was a monumentally cool guy, a great friend.

Juice was surprised, disconcerted even, to see Desi, of all people, walk up the aisle and wend her way to the empty seat next to him. He'd had no idea that Frank had invited her, and he'd had no idea that they were close enough that Desi would come. She gave him a sly smile as she sat down.

"Juice." She was dressed conservatively, in a simple black suit and high black pumps. The rubber corset worked better with her magenta hair and visible ink, actually, but it was a nice suit.

"Hi, Desi. Didn't know you'd be here." Seeing her outside of her velvet room made Juice uncomfortable. He didn't like the idea that she was connected to Frank in any way outside the club.

She smiled. She really was strikingly beautiful. "I wouldn't miss it. Frank is a bit like a daughter to me."

Juice thought that was disturbing for a whole lot of reasons, but he let it drop and returned his focus to his girl.

He'd expected to be bored and ignore all of the program but the part where they called Frank's name, but he found himself listening intently to the commencement speaker. Juice supposed that she wasn't saying much original—lots about the promise and potential of the future, the responsibility of the graduates to make the most of their opportunities, and so on—but it made him think again about how small Charming was for someone like Frank.

He got so wrapped up in those melancholy thoughts that he almost missed her. If he'd been alone, he would have, but Marnie and Desi stood up—even Garrett did, partway—and started cheering as Frank walked up the steps to the stage. He got up with them. He heard her full name for the first time: “Frances Caroline Duvall.”

Wow. It was beautiful. He wondered if it was strange that he hadn't known her whole name.

He watched his girl cross the stage, shake hands and take her diploma, and then turn to seek them out in the crowd. They all four got loud and rowdy, and she found them. She locked eyes with Garrett and pumped her fist over her head. Her smile was huge and bright.

He looked over at her brother, his friend, to see tears streaming down his smiling face.

OOO

They all went out to lunch afterwards, even Desi. She turned out to be great company—lots of lively conversation and banter. She, Marnie, and Frank riffed for a good twenty minutes on women in popular culture, while Garrett and Juice communed with each other through loaded looks, unable to get a word in. Juice still didn't get how Desi was part of Frank's graduation celebration—even Garrett was a bit taken aback to have a stranger suddenly part of their group—but he understood her appeal as a person a bit better. She was smart and interesting.

After the meal, the little party broke up. Garrett was still weak, and he wanted to rest before Frank's party. Marnie took him home; she was staying with him until he was on his feet. Juice wondered whether that might turn into something more permanent. He hoped so. They were obviously into each other, and Garrett deserved someone who could make him happy.

As Desi was saying goodbye, Frank, who'd had two glasses of celebratory champagne and had passed buzzed a couple of exits back on the highway to plastered, asked Desi to come home with them. Juice tensed. Desi looked at him. He met her look and shook once. No. Not today, not now, while things were still somehow off-kilter with Frank.

Desi smiled at him and nodded. “Sorry, sweets, I have to get back. Everything falls apart if I'm not around to run things. You two come and see me soon, though, okay? I miss you when you stay away.” She leaned down to kiss Frank's cheek. Frank put her hands on Desi's face and turned into the kiss, her mouth open. Desi kissed her back.

He should have thought it was hot to watch them make out, in broad daylight on the sidewalk. He *loved* girl-on-girl action; it was his favorite kind of porn. But with Frank, it just hurt. Unless they were rolling. Even then a little, really.

Desi left, and it was just the two of them, standing on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. Frank snuggled under his arm and pressed against him. He kissed the top of her head. He thought a nap was in order for her, too, before she faced a SAMCRO blowout—one in her honor, no less. “You okay to ride back to my place, baby?”

She smiled up at him, her eyes a bit more lidded than he'd like. "Sure. Bitches ride bitch, right?"

Sober Frank considered "bitch" a grave insult and hated that way of describing riding double. He looked down into her eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm *fine*. Let's go. Geez. Fuckin' nanny."

And she was fine, more or less. He took the ride easy, and she mostly remembered to hold on. They got to his place in one piece. He made her drink a bottle of water and put her to bed, lying with her tucked against him. She snuggled in, her head on his chest, and fell asleep right away.

He stared at the ceiling.

OOO

With the exception of some black and purple streamers, gifts, and a mortarboard cake, Frank's graduation party was like every other SAMCRO party. Frank didn't really have friends—not in Charming, anyway—so it was pretty much the same crowd, too, with the exception of Garrett and Marnie. The music was loud, the booze flowed, and the haze of weed grew thicker as the night went on.

Juice was glad to see how well everyone treated Garrett, and how readily Garrett accepted this wild bunch. The guy had buckets of mellow to spare. He just went along with anything that came in his path. Almost anything, anyway. He was so different from everybody here, but, once welcomed, he managed to figure out a way to fit in. He was stuck in the chair, so they'd found him an advantageous spot, where people could come to him, and he could see as much as possible of what was going on. Marnie sat with him, watching avidly. She'd laughed out loud when she'd first seen the stripper pole in the corner. Juice imagined her taking field notes: *Bikers in Their Natural Habitat*, or something. He got a kick out of her fascination.

Juice looked over an hour or so in and saw Garrett, Marnie, and Bobby in deep conversation. He went over to check it out. They were talking music. He hadn't known Garrett was into blues, but he and Bobby were in the thick of a detailed debate about historical influences. He smiled and left them to it.

Garrett tired easily, though, and Marnie took him home after only a couple of hours. He said his goodbyes, getting handshakes and fist bumps. Frank bounced over and hugged him gently. When she pulled back, Juice saw Garrett mouth the words "I love you," and Frank kissed his cheek. Then Marnie wheeled him out.

Juice thought it would be cool to see Garrett around there more often.

Frank was flitting around the room, in social butterfly mode. He was having a hard time keeping up with her, in fact. When he put his arm around her or his hand on her, it wouldn't be long before she'd skip off to some other part of the room. Like she was intentionally making distance.

But then she'd catch his eye and give him a dazzling smile, or she'd come up to him and pull him down for a deep kiss. He didn't know what to think, really.

She'd dressed for a party, in torn fishnets, her black Docs, a snug black mini, and a sheer red t-shirt with a black bra underneath. He wasn't about to say anything to her about it, but Juice would have preferred her to be more covered, especially around these guys. None of them would ever touch her like that—she was no fucking Crow Eater, she was his—but he couldn't do anything about their eyes, and now he could see that their eyes were looking their fill.

Her reluctance to drink did not sit well with this crew, especially not when she was the guest of honor. She'd started with beer, and Juice was making sure she was eating and getting water, too. But now he saw Tig pouring tequila shooters down the bar, Frank lined up with Rat and Phil. As he started toward the bar to get between Frank and the kind of drunk she was headed for, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Juicy, brutha.” Chibs turned him around. “Our favorite new copper is outside askin' fer ya.”

Juice felt exhausted all at once. Fuck. Now? He'd gone weeks without any heat at all. And now Roosevelt, the new lieutenant from the San Joa Sheriff's office, was at the clubhouse during Frank's party? *Motherfucker!*

“What's he want?”

Chibs shrugged. “Didn't ask. Somebody's gunnin' fer ya, seems to me.”

“Fuck. Okay.” He looked over at Frank, who was downing a shot—hopefully her only, but Juice thought that unlikely now—and went out to face whatever heat awaited him. He hoped it'd be quick.

Eli Roosevelt was leaning against his cruiser. He was alone, the lot otherwise deserted. That was something, anyway. Juice walked up to him and stopped, saying nothing.

“Ortiz. Sorry to pull you away from your party. I understand your old lady is the guest of honor. College graduation. Can't imagine that happens much around here.”

Juice stared at him. “Is there something you want?”

“Not tonight, no. Tonight I've got something you want.” He held out a brown file folder.

Juice didn't take it. “What the fuck are you people up to now?”

Roosevelt shook the folder a little, still holding it out to Juice. “Take it. You want it, trust me. No tricks.”

Juice glared at the cop, his spidey senses tingling. He took the folder and opened it. It was the information about his father. He looked up. “What the hell?”

“It’s the only copy. It’s yours. Do whatever you want with it. That bullshit is over.” Roosevelt folded his arms across his beefy chest.

Juice didn’t understand. “Why are you giving this to me? I didn’t deliver.”

Roosevelt nodded. “True. And I don’t know what’s going to happen with RICO. But I’m running Charming now, and I don’t play dirty. You’re a bad guy. I’m a cop. You do bad shit. I stop you. I’ll take you down. But I won’t do it dirty, and I damn sure won’t use race against anyone. For any fucking reason. If that screws up the Fed assholes, that’s just a bonus.”

Juice didn’t know what to say. It didn’t get him clear of everything, but it was a huge fucking weight lifting off his back. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t get comfortable. I *will* take you down, Ortiz. It’s a promise.” He held out his broad brown hand. Juice, not even believing he was doing so, shook it.

When Roosevelt left, Juice locked the file in his saddlebag and went back into the clubhouse. As soon as he’d cleared the door, before he’d put his eyes on Frank to check on her, he felt a strong hand on his neck.

Chibs voice was low in his ear. “Come with me, boy.” Holding tight to Juice’s neck, Chibs led him down the hall to the bathroom and locked them both in.

“What the fuck was that, Juicy? What did he fucking give ya? Shite, boy, what’re ya up to?”

Holy fucking Christ. The fucking cameras. He’d fucking *installed* the fuckers, and he didn’t think about them, and the fact that the entire club was in the room with the monitors, when he *took a fucking file from a cop*. Jesus. Would the stupid ever stop with him? His brain spun. And then he felt tears coming. Oh, he was so fucked.

He had no idea what to say. Chibs looked fit to slit his throat right there. The truth was the only thing in Juice’s head.

“It’s information about my father. The Feds were trying to use it to make me flip on the club. Roosevelt called them off somehow. I don’t know why, but he gave me the info and said it wouldn’t get used. I didn’t deliver, Chibs. I didn’t.” That was true enough, anyway. The full truth would get him killed for sure, right here and now in this bathroom, probably.

Chibs looked bewildered, but no less angry. “Why the fuck would the Feds think yer father was leverage?”

Now Juice couldn’t hold back the tears. His life as a Son was over. If he was lucky, he could get Chibs to wait until Frank’s party was over to tell the rest of the club. “He’s black, Chibs.”

“So the fuck what?”

Juice looked at him. “Blacks can’t be Sons. It’s a rule.”

“Aw, Juicy. What’s it say on yer birth certificate?”

Juice was too upset to think clearly. “What?”

“Yer paperwork, asshole! Is yer da’ on your birth certificate?”

“No!”

Chibs grabbed him by the kutte and shook him. “Where it says ‘race,’ what box is checked?”

“Hispanic!”

“That’s all that fuckin’ matters, ya daft idiot! Half o’ us got no idea who our da’ is. The paperwork is what matters! Jaysus!”

Juice stared at Chibs while he let that sink in. He wiped his face and opened his mouth to say something—he wasn’t sure what—when someone pounded on the door. “Juice! You in there?” It was Ope.

Juice opened the door. Ope took in Chibs and Juice in the bathroom together. “I’m not even gonna ask.” He looked at Juice. “You need to get out here, brother. Now. Those assholes have been feeding Frank shots.”

“Fuck.” He pushed past Ope and ran back to the main room, looking for Frank. His heart sank when he found her.

She was on the pole.

OOO

He was going to fucking gut Tig. The sick fuck thought Juice was too soft to be a Son and was always fucking with him. But to go after Frank? No fucking way. He looked over and saw Tig laughing, egging her on, like she was a goddamn Crow Eater. He was going to gut him and string his intestines around the club like a garland. Later. Now he was going to save Frank from this bullshit.

Despite his fury and his desperation to get through the room and get her off the fucking pole, Juice noticed that she was pretty good on it, her ballet body limber and lithe, even as drunk as she was. She was using the pole more like gymnastics equipment than a stripper pole. He saw Lilli on the edge of the little stage, trying to talk Frank down. When Juice got there, Lilli gave him a look that clearly said, *Sorry—I tried*. Juice nodded.

She was upside down and flipping over; it was difficult to get hold of her without getting a headful of Doc Martens, but he managed it. She fought him hard, but he ignored her, gathering her up into his arms as she kicked and hit. She was yelling at him, but he couldn't make out much of what she was saying. He did make out one thing, and it hurt: "Fucking liar!"

Then she relaxed all at once. He looked down. She was still awake; she had just sort of given up. He walked straight out of the clubhouse, not sure how he was going to get her home. He stood in the lot trying to think.

Fuck this fucking night.

Gemma came up behind him. "Sorry, baby. I didn't know that shit was going on until it was too late. Where the hell were *you*, though?"

Juice couldn't think of any kind of answer, so he just looked at her. She nodded. "Okay. Well, come on. Let's get her home." She stuck her finger in his face. "Don't you let her heave in my truck."

He rode in the back seat of Gemma's Escalade, Frank in his arms, sleeping now. Most of the ride was quiet. Then Juice said, "I'm going to break Tig's ugly fucking face."

Gemma met his eyes in the rearview. "Worry about that later, baby. Right now, you need to take care of your girl."

Gemma asked if he needed her to come in. He didn't, so he thanked her and took Frank inside. He got her to bed. He stripped her down to her bra and underwear and lay down next to her. For a long time, he lay watching her, running his hand gently through her hair and over her cheek.

He loved her so much. They were out of whack, though, and he didn't know how to get them true again.

OOO

He woke alone in bed. It was full daylight. He got up to look for Frank, hoping she was still even in the house.

He found her on the floor of the bathroom. She'd been sick and hadn't made it to the toilet. She was curled up on the floor, clutching a bath towel. She was sleeping in her sick. Sleeping, passed out, whatever.

He pulled another towel off the rod and soaked it in cold water. He wrung it out and squatted down next to her. He gently touched her face with the cool cloth, wanting to wipe her clean, to get her out of this mess, to help her.

She opened her eyes. When she saw him, she whimpered and skittered backwards until she hit the tub. *What the fuck?*

“Frank! It’s okay, baby. It’s me. It’s okay.” She didn’t relax. Instead, she started to cry.

He reached for her, and she flinched back so hard she slammed her elbow on the tub. She didn’t seem to notice.

“Baby, what’s wrong? Let me help. Please, let me help.”

She was really crying. He was not at all used to Frank’s tears, and he was seriously worried. He said again, “Please, baby.”

She looked at him, naked panic in her eyes. “I don’t remember. I don’t remember. I don’t remember.”

## CHAPTER 20:

### “Trust,” The Cure

Her head hurt so fucking much she thought she was dying. She hoped she was. She couldn't seem to make clear thoughts. The room was spinning and dancing around her. And there was a huge black space where part of her life should be. She didn't know how she'd gotten here, on the floor of a bathroom in her underwear. If she worked hard, she remembered being at the clubhouse, watching Garrett and Marnie have a good time. But then just a huge black space.

And Juice was there in front of her in his underwear, and what the fuck did he do to her? Oh, God. What the fuck did he do? God, please no. Not again. Please, no.

Something in her head felt like it was skidding off its track.

*I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't remember.*

She must have said it aloud, because he backed off fast.

“Oh, baby, you're okay. It's okay. I promise.” It was like he was talking to her through water. She tried to get farther away, but she was stuck somehow, something blocking her, her feet sliding in something slick.

“I'm gonna get help. It's gonna be okay, baby. I'll be right back. You're gonna be okay.”

He left. She relaxed the tiniest bit, and dark overtook her.

OOO

When she next felt anything, she felt a cool spray of water. It felt good. Soothing. But then she knew she was naked, and she felt arms around her, and she panicked. Her fear and confusion came back in a rush, and oh, God, it was still happening. She was coming back in the middle, like before. She fought to get free, but the arms around her were strong. Then she heard a woman's voice.

“Easy, Frank. I'm just helping you get cleaned up. It's okay. You're safe, honey. Shhh. Easy.”

Dr. Accardo? Was she in the shower with her history professor? Was her professor part of this? She couldn't think. She didn't want to know. She gave in to the dark again.

OOO

“... fucking kill him ...”

“... Lilli broke his nose ...”

“... get her to take water, but not too much ...”

“... I'm so sorry, baby ... love you ...”

OOO

Frank opened her eyes. She was in a bed in a dark room. She felt panic at first, but then she got her bearings. Juice's room—the light in his bathroom was on. She sat up, but dropped back down to the pillow. Holy fuck, her head.

“Hi, baby. You waking up?”

She lay there and tried to piece it all together. There were so many pieces missing, though, and all she could feel was a crushing sense of fear and betrayal. Juice leaned in and tried to touch her, but she couldn't stand even the thought of his skin on hers, and she shrank back.

“Frank. You just got drunk. That's all. Nothing happened. You got very drunk, and I brought you here to sleep. Just sleep. I promise. I *swear*. Please believe me.”

She couldn't stay in here with him. She scooted off the other side of the bed and stood. She was wearing one of his t-shirts, nothing else. She took a step toward the door, and the room tilted to one side and then tilted hard back the other way. She fell to her hands and knees, the impact sending bright arrows of pain through her head.

He came around the bed and leaned down to put his hands on her arms. She cringed and yelled, “DON'T!” More of a croak than a yell.

He backed off, saying, “Baby, *please* . . .” She heard his voice break.

Within a few seconds, there were more people in the room. Female voices. She was still looking at the floor, waiting for her vision to clear.

Someone different squatted down close to her. “Let's get you back into bed, Frank. Everything's going to be okay.” She looked up. She didn't know who this was—no, wait. This was . . . Tara. Tara, right. And then she saw Dr. Acc—Lilli. She didn't understand, but she let them help her up and back into bed.

She heard Tara say, “Juice, why don't you go out to the living room or something for a little while—I know, I'm sorry. Let us talk to her. Go on.”

Lilli handed her an uncapped bottle of water. “Here, honey. Drink a little of this. It will help. I'll get you something to eat in a minute, too, if you think you can keep it.”

She tipped the bottle to her lips. It was cool and sweet and felt so good. Frank relaxed a little as the water ran down her throat. But then her stomach rebelled, and she leaned over the side of the bed in a rush.

Lilli had been prepared; she held a plastic wastebasket up, and Frank puked the water up into that.

Lilli smiled and put her hand on Frank's forehead. "Okay, then. We'll hold off on food for a while longer."

"Let's keep working on the water, though. Little sips, and we'll get you some ice chips. I'd like to keep you out of the hospital if we can." That was Tara. Frank remembered that she was some kind of a doctor. A pediatrician or something like that.

God, she felt so muddy and incomplete. Like she was moving through quicksand in a stranger's dream. She'd felt like this once before. Only once. And now, again. Her sanity was packing its bags and fleeing out the back door.

"It happened again. Right?" She looked at both women. They looked at each other.

Tara sat down on the side of the bed and took her hand. "You have a rape in your past, don't you?"

Frank couldn't say anything. She just looked Tara steadily in the eye.

The doctor patted her hand. "We can go to the hospital and do a test, if you would like to. It's completely up to you. But if you're asking if you were drugged, no, sweetheart. I'm sure of it. You had a lot to drink last night, and you're not very big. I think you're dealing with a case of alcohol poisoning. If you hadn't thrown up so much before I got here, you'd have woken up in the hospital."

Lilli added, "Juice took you home early, when it was clear that you were very drunk. Gemma drove you, so his bike is still at T-M. Nothing bad happened to you, Frank—well, nothing except how sick you got."

She was quiet, trying to use what they were saying to fill in the empty spaces.

"Frank, look at me." She looked up and met Lilli's eyes. "Juice took care of you, honey. He didn't hurt you. He took care of you. And when you were afraid of him, he knew to call us. Understand?"

She held Lilli's eyes for a couple of seconds, trying to put the pieces into place, make them fit. He didn't hurt her. He helped her. Finally, she nodded.

"I'm going to go get you some ice chips. Can I send them in with Juice? He's going crazy with worry."

Again, she took a moment before she responded. And again, finally, she nodded.

Lilli smiled and went out. Tara stood and went to clean out the wastebasket.

Juice came in, holding a glass full of ice chips, a spoon sticking out the top. He just stood in the doorway at first.

“This okay?”

She honestly didn't know if it was. Everything in her head was thick. It hurt so much, like razor blades and barbed wire sinking into her brain. It was hard to think. She knew what Lilli said. She believed her. But she still felt fear when she looked at Juice. She believed that he hadn't hurt her, that he'd taken care of her. But she didn't know how to turn off the fear.

She nodded, and he came in and sat on a kitchen chair next to the bed. She wondered if it was the same chair she'd brought in for him to use when he'd been shot.

“I brought you some ice chips. Want to try to have some?”

She nodded again, and he scooped a few out on the spoon and held it out. She moved to take the spoon from him, but he went straight to her mouth with it. She let him feed her the chips.

The cold wet felt wonderful, and she closed her eyes for a moment as the chips melted and the cool water slid down her sore throat. When she opened them again, he was watching her. He looked really sad.

He fed her another spoonful. “I don't know what I should do, Frank. The way you're looking at me is killing me. I can't stand that you're afraid of me. How can I make it better, baby? I'll do anything.”

He looked so worried. Under the fear and mistrust that was pulsing in her head, she could feel the love she had for him. She felt bad for making him feel bad. But fuck, she just felt bad in general. So bad. She wanted to cut her head off. She wanted to sleep.

He was just watching her with that sad, scared look in his eyes. She had to say something. “I don't know how to make it better. I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't stop being scared.”

He reached to take her hand, but she couldn't deal. She pulled away. She saw how it hurt him that she did. “Baby, I promise I didn't hurt you. I didn't let you get hurt. I promise. *I promise.*”

“I believe you. I do. But I can't turn off the scared. My head feels broken. I'm so tired. I'm sorry.”

He fed her another spoon of ice chips. “I have an idea. But you need to trust me a little for it to work. Just a little. Can you do that?”

She wasn't going to answer until she knew what he meant. She waited.

“I would like to get in bed with you—” She shrank back; that was a lot of trust, not a little. “Wait, Frank. I'll keep all my clothes on. I want you to put your head on my chest and see if you can fall asleep. You like that. Or you did. Can we try that?”

She thought for a long time. The idea of him touching her made her skin crawl. But she knew she was being crazy, and she could tell that even crazier, maybe real crazy, the permanent kind, was just a short trip farther down this road.

He spoke again. "Tara and Lilli are still here. I'll ask them to stay, if that would make you feel safer. Okay, baby?"

Okay. Time to take an off-ramp. She'd try. She nodded, and Juice stood up. "I'll be right back. I'm just going to tell them what's going on."

He came back in. "Tara wants you to try some water before you sleep. You up to trying some water?"

She nodded, and he handed her the bottle and picked up the wastebasket. She took a swallow, waited for it to hit her stomach, then waited some more. All clear. She took another swallow. Still good. She drank about half the bottle, and her stomach let her be. Best water she'd ever had in her whole life. Afraid of pushing it, she handed the bottle back to Juice.

He set the wastebasket down and capped the bottle. "You ready?"

No, she wasn't. But she nodded anyway, and Juice got into bed with her.

## CHAPTER 21:

### “Let It Be Me,” Social Distortion

He lay on his back and held his arm out, inviting her in. She came, slowly, reluctantly, and settled herself with her head hovering over his chest. She was trembling. He forced himself to be quiet and still and just wait. In a few seconds, she let the weight of her head rest on his chest, and he could feel her relax, just a bit, against him. He brought his arm down around her, his hand on her hip. She jumped. He cleared his throat. She jumped again.

It was like holding a wild rabbit. How could his girl be so afraid of him? No, he knew how. He knew exactly how. It started with Jordan fucking Elster and ended with Tig fucking Trager, with plenty of Juice fucking Ortiz in the middle. Juice didn't even care that Tig didn't know her history, that he thought he was just messing around, having a little fun at Juicy Boy's expense, getting his girl plastered so she'd make a fool of herself. Frank was protected. She should have been, anyway. This was so over the fucking line.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who thought so. Turned out that Lilli, a badass in some kind of martial arts who'd already taken Tig down once in the ring, had done a spin kick and put her own Doc in his face after Juice had taken Frank out of the party. She'd broken his nose, and Tara reported that the sentiment around the club was he'd deserved it. Tara, who'd reset his nose and cleaned him up, said that Tig actually felt a little bad about it all. Juice supposed he could consider the matter dealt with, but he didn't know how he'd be able to let it go.

Goddammit. She was his girl. He should be able to trust his brothers to take care of her, treat her with respect. Even fucking Trager. He would never have done something like that to Tara or Lilli. Or, shit, Gemma. Clay would remove his head with his bare hands if he messed with Gemma.

Juice knew what needed to happen. How to make it happen was another problem.

Frank finally relaxed, really relaxed, into him, and her hand came up to rest on his abdomen. He tipped his head down to try to see her face. He couldn't see much in the light from the bathroom, but he could make out her eyelashes moving as she blinked. She was still awake. He found it heartening that she'd relaxed with him before she fell asleep. He pressed his lips to her head, and she turned her face, ever so slightly, into his chest. The hot coil around his heart loosened a little.

It wasn't long before he could feel her breathing deepen. She'd gone to sleep.

OOO

She slept through the night, almost ten hours. He lay there the whole time without moving. His back tightened up and started to scream, but he lay still, letting her rest undisturbed, relaxed on him. Tara peeked in at some point; Juice put his finger to his mouth. She whispered that she had to get back to her boys but that Lilli was staying through the night. Juice gave her a thumbs up and mouthed, *Thank you*. She backed out and closed the door quietly.

He must have dozed off finally, because he woke up in daylight, with Frank's hand on his bare skin, under his shirt, rubbing gentle circles on his belly. He had a huge hard-on. He looked down and met her eyes. No fear there. *Oh, thank God.*

He took a deep breath and stretched a little, still trying not to disturb her. "Hey, baby. Feeling any better?"

She smiled, and the tension he'd been feeling for hours and hours, unrelenting, eased off in a rush. "I am. My head feels like it's on right again. Blacking out is really bad for me, I guess. Too much like—well. It's still freaking me out a little not to know what happened, but I get now that it wasn't the same. I'm sorry for being crazy."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry you were so scared and sick. I'm just glad you're doing better. You had us pretty worried."

She lifted her head when he said "us." "Are they still here?"

"Tara had to go back to her kids, but Lilli's still here, I think. That okay?"

"Yeah. They were so nice to me." She put her head back on his chest. "I guess I told them I'd been raped before."

"I think they'd already figured that out because of the way you were." As long as they were on the subject, he might as well tell her about the other awkward conversation he'd had with them. "I had to explain about your belly, after Lilli helped you shower."

She pulled away a bit and looked down at him. "What did you say?"

He shrugged. With everything else, he'd already hit his limit on worry, so if this set her off, it set her off. "The truth, or what they needed of it. That you'd hurt yourself during a bad trip."

She just looked at him. Then she nodded. "Okay." She put her head back down on his chest, then brought it right back up. "Thank you. For taking care of me."

There was something happening here that was so good it was maybe almost worth the past 36 hours. He felt like he and Frank were lining up right again. He put his hand on her face. "I love you, baby. Always. No matter what. I would do anything for you."

"I love you. I'm sorry I make it so hard."

He shifted, ignoring the loud protest from his lower back, and rolled them slightly, so that she was on her back and he was propped over her. "Loving you is as easy as breathing for me." He smiled. "Knowing what kind of love you need—sometimes that's a little harder."

She smiled back at him. She was pale, and her makeup was incompletely washed off, and she looked like she'd been really sick—she had, after all—but she was still beautiful to him. “I just need your kind of love.”

He leaned down to kiss her, and she put her hand on the back of his head. She kept her lips closed, though, even when he nudged at them a bit with his tongue. He pulled back a little. “You don't want this?”

She pushed him back, and his heart sank again. “I do. But I feel like a diseased animal crawled into my mouth and died last night. I think I need to get up and brush or get something to drink or eat—or maybe all of that—before I'm kissworthy. But after that, definitely.”

He grinned at her. “Okay. Let's get you back up and running.”

OOO

She went into the bathroom, and he headed to the kitchen, arching his back to crack it and sighing with relief. He planned to make eggs, toast, and coffee, but as he came down the hall Lilli came up. “How's the patient?”

“Much better this morning. I'm going to make her some breakfast—you in?”

“About that. You should let her know that Opie's here, so she's not surprised. He came to pick me up, since Tara was my ride here. He brought muffins from Bobby. I put coffee on. Hope that's okay. If it's not, we'll clear out right away—unless you still need me, in which case I'll just send Opie packing.”

Juice smiled. “It should be fine, but I'll let her know. Thank you, Lilli. You saved a lot yesterday. You and Tara.”

She kissed his cheek. “We love you, bucko. We're here for you, and for Frank. You did really great, by the way. You did some saving yourself.”

Frank came out a little later, her face washed, drowning in his t-shirt and sweats, but comfortably covered. She was sheepish and quiet at first, but everyone acted normal around her, and she relaxed. She drank water, and she had a couple of Bobby's famous honey cranberry muffins. Juice saw the color come back to her face and the vibrancy to her personality.

By the time they were winding up their breakfast, she was practically back to normal. She leaned over and plucked a crumb out of Opie's beard and held it up to him. “I'll have to report this to Marnie, you know.” Opie snorted.

They cleaned up, then Lilli looked at Frank and said, “You look a whole lot better, so we're going to take off, if that's okay. You good now?”

Frank nodded and then hugged Lilli. She whispered, “thank you.” Juice was stunned. Frank? Not, in general, a hugger. She had a very short list of huggable people: Garrett. Juice—usually. The end. Now, apparently, add Lilli.

Lilli hugged her back. “Any time you need me, honey. But no more tequila for you, okay?”

Frank pulled back and made a face. “God. Never ever. Never.”

OOO

After they left, Juice folded Frank into his arms. She settled in, and they stood there, holding each other. Then she went to take a shower, and he went back to the kitchen for another cup of coffee. He stood at the counter for a couple of minutes, drinking and thinking. It was a risk, but he decided to try.

He went down the hall, pulling his shirt up over his head as he went.

She’d left the bathroom door open. Encouraging. He leaned in. He could see her through the clear shower curtain, even as it was steaming up. She was leaning back, under the stream, washing shampoo out of her hair. He knocked on the open door. “Baby?”

She straightened up, putting her arms over her breasts. Less encouraging.

“I was wondering if you’d mind if I joined you. You up for that?”

She was quiet for a few beats. He was getting discouraged. Then she pushed the shower curtain open, and Juice dropped his jeans and boxers and stepped across the bathroom, into the shower.

She stood facing him, and he put his hands on her little waist. They just looked into each other’s eyes for a moment, and then Frank put her arms up, over his shoulders, her hands on his head. He leaned down to kiss her, and she climbed up on him, her arms snug around his neck, her legs encircling his waist. Now, that was more like it. He let himself relax and feel her. “Oh, baby. I love you.” He swelled against her core; he held her close and kissed her, hard and deep.

She matched him, clutching his head to hers and grinding against him. After several intense seconds during which a kind of elation surged through Juice, Frank broke their kiss and looked at him, still thrusting hard on him.

He knew that look, but he had to make sure. “You sure about this? We can stop, no problem. I don’t want to push it.”

“I want you in me. Oh, God, Juice. I *need* you in me. Please love me.”

Trying to keep up with her emotions was like an Olympic event, but damn. Okay.

He turned and put her up against the wall, the shower spraying across his back, over his shoulders, putting light, misty droplets on her face. He took a hand from her ass to grab himself and push against her entrance. They thrust against each other, and he slid deep into her. She started rocking hard on him, moaning already, her legs flexing around his hips. He pushed her harder against the wall, shoving into her, and he leaned down to suckle her pierced nipple.

She cried out and clutched his head harder to her, her nails scratching at his scalp. Her hips were moving fast, getting out of sync with him. She was coming, already. He brought his head up to kiss her, taking her nipple between his fingers until she gasped and arched back, tense and suddenly still, her fingers digging into his neck. He kept thrusting, in complete control of himself, and as she slowly settled. He could do this for a while. He wondered how many times he could bring her off before he had to go himself.

“You okay, baby?” He didn’t want to wear her out, though, after she’d just been so sick.

“God, yes. So good,” she moaned.

He needed more range of motion. He stepped out of the tub, leaving the showerhead running, and sat her on the counter. She leaned back on the wall, changing the angle and letting him run the show on his own for a bit. He pulled her hips to the edge of the counter so that she was leaning back pretty far. With one hand, he tweaked and rolled her unpierced nipple (he knew he tended to neglect that one). He pressed down with the flat of his other palm, low on her belly, covering her tat. He could just about feel his cock moving inside her.

Her eyes got big as she realized the pleasure emanating from the place inside her that was sandwiched between his cock and his hand, his cock sliding hard, back and forth, against that sensitive spot. She grabbed his wrist with both hands, pulling down, wordlessly asking him to increase the pressure. He did.

“Oh, fuck, Juice. Oh, God. Oh, God—oh GOD!” She tensed hard, clamping down on him, as she came. Her nails were digging into his wrist. He didn’t care at all. When she was winding down, he started to ease up and slow down, but she clung to his wrist. “No, don’t stop. More. More, more, more. Harder, harder, harder, God. There, oh there. Oh, God.” Christ, she was coming again already. He pressed down and slammed into her—okay, this was intense for him, too, and he wasn’t sure he was going to be able to hold off—and then she sat up and reached around his hand to rub her clit. She came so hard he had to stop and grab her before she hit her head, all while she was surging on him, her hand going hard, finishing off her peak.

Holy fuck, that was hot. But he’d held on.

She whimpered and clung to him when he picked her back up. He chuckled. “Don’t worry, baby. If you’re not done, I’m not done.” He carried her to the bedroom, still deep inside her and breathing deeply through the *fantastic* sensation of moving in her as he walked. She shifted, improving her seat on his hips, and he had to stop and close his eyes for a second.

He sat down on the bed, and she pushed on his shoulders. He lay back, and she put her hands on his pecs, leaning into him and starting to rock.

Okay, now he was going to go. No choice—the pressure was on him as soon as she started moving. He put his hands on her hips and thrust up into her, matching her, letting her set a slow and steady rhythm at first, trying to hold on long enough to bring her off one more time. She was moaning low and sexy, but she wasn't escalating, and he really, really was. He'd been demanding a lot of himself here. He held her tight and took over, each thrust faster and harder. "I'm sorry, baby," he panted. "I have to go this time. God. I do. Like. Right. NOW." He slammed up into her several times, grunting, his teeth clenched, and then, as he held, pulsing into her, his head and shoulders raised off the bed with the strain, she flexed against him fast and hard, crying out.

When they were done, he flopped back down onto the bed, bringing her with him to rest on his chest. He was proud as hell. Oh, yeah. Four. That's right. He'd kept count.

OOO

The following week was just awesome. As horrendous as the night and day after her party had been, it had cleared out whatever had been stuck in the gears of their relationship, and they were running smooth now. Frank had been much more her usual self, without the weird hot-and-cold affection thing that had been going on since Garrett had been shot. She was fiery and foul-mouthed and funny, and he felt her trust coming back. And, Jesus, they'd had amazing sex. It was always great, but the intensity had been turned up into the red zone lately.

Somehow, he thought that the decision to bring Lilli and Tara in that day was the thing that restored her trust in him. He'd done it on impulse, understanding that he couldn't help, that no man could, and not knowing who else to call—and he'd only called Lilli, not even thinking that Frank might need a doctor. Lilli had thought of that and brought Tara. But still. He didn't understand it, but he was pretty sure having Lilli and Tara help her had made a huge difference. They sure as hell had helped him.

Level Up was open again, and he was spending most of his time there, helping Frank run it. Marnie had brought Garrett in a couple of times, and he was itching to get back on his feet and back to work. Those two were so comfortable and easy with each other now, Juice thought maybe the permanent thing not so far out for them.

He'd been avoiding Tig as much as he could. They'd had church twice that week, dealing with cartel shit, and the first time they were in the same room together, Tig had come up to him, two black eyes, his nose bandaged—Lilli had really kicked the shit out of his face—and said, "Sorry, man. My bad."

*No shit, asshole.* Juice had glared at him. All any of them knew was that Frank had gotten alcohol poisoning and thus thought Tig had simply gotten her too drunk. Not even Jax and Opie knew about the rest. With the broken nose and the apology, the club would consider the matter

dealt with. For a brief second, Juice had tried to let it be dealt with. But he'd stood there thinking about what Frank had gone through and the line Tig had crossed.

He'd looked at this "brother." He'd asked, "Who's idea was the pole?" Tig had grinned, just a little, and said "Aw, man, I was just playin'." And Juice had driven his fist into Tig's damaged nose.

Tig had managed to stay on his feet and charge him, and they'd gone at each other for a few minutes, flattening one of the tables in the clubhouse. But the rest of the guys didn't let it go on long. Usually they let that shit play itself out, but Tig was pretty thoroughly fucked up already. When it was over and they were both struggling against restraining arms, Tig had shouted through his bloody mouth and impacted nose, "If you care so fucking much, *do* something about it, ya pussy!"

Indeed.

He was going to have to have a talk with Frank.

OOO

They were sitting in his living room, him in his boxers, her in his t-shirt, their legs interlaced, eating delivered Thai food and watching *Lost* DVDs. She was still tousled and a little flushed from their bout of pretty wild sex. She looked adorable and so very hot. She'd gotten a kick out of answering the door to get the food in nothing but his t-shirt.

An episode ended, and he started the next. She grunted and gestured at the TV, still chewing her chicken satay. "This last ep and then I have to motor. Smeagol is going to report me for neglect if I don't spend some time at my own place. Running in to throw some food at him isn't going to cut it anymore."

He'd been looking for an opening, the right time, for days. This was the best one to come around. "Why don't you just bring him here?"

She stopped chewing and looked at him. "What?"

Her look wasn't what he'd call encouraging, but he took a breath and sat fully up, putting his tin of food on the floor. "We're together most of the time anyway, and lately we've been here most of the time we're together—or at the shop. The living arrangement right now seems . . ." he petered out. She looked, well, shocked. And not with delight.

"What are you saying, Juice?" She was going to make him say it, apparently, and now he was even more anxious about putting it out there.

"I'm saying that I want you to go get your cat and move in with me." He took a breath and went all in—or mostly in, anyway. "I'm also saying that I want to call you my old lady, and I want the club to know you as that."

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” Yeah, she wasn’t doing much for his self-confidence right now. He’d been harboring a tiny hope that this conversation would be romantic, but it was actually going, so far, about like he’d expected.

She put her own food down and turned to face him full on. “Let’s deal with this whole “old lady” thing first. What does that even mean? Are you asking me to fucking marry you?”

Well, he’d considered that but had decided the odds of him getting the answer he wanted weren’t good enough yet—one of his few smart calls, obviously. Usually he thought her tendency to stick the word “fuck” or “fucking” into almost every sentence was cute. Not in that particular sentence, though. Ouch. “No, I’m not. Lilli is Ope’s old lady, and they’re not married yet. Tara and Jax aren’t married yet, either. Old lady and wife aren’t the same thing.”

“Yeah, but they’re all *engaged*, right? So it’s almost the same thing.”

He sighed. How to explain this? “Some guys never marry their old ladies. It doesn’t have to mean the same thing. It’s a commitment. It means that you’re in it for the long haul.”

“Sounds like marriage to me.”

His feelings were starting to get really hurt here. “Frank. Are you committed to this? Are you really all in, like you say? Or aren’t you? Because if you’re not, then we need to have a different conversation.”

She looked over at the TV. The episode was still playing, Michael yelling ‘WALT!’ over and over; she picked up the remote and hit “stop.” She turned back to him. “I’m in. I’m all in. I’m here. But I just turned 23. I just graduated college. I don’t know why I have to be your ‘old lady.’ Why can’t I just be your girl?”

“Being an old lady gives you respect in the clubhouse. Protection.”

She pricked up her ears at that. “Respect I don’t already have? And protection from what? What do I need protection from *in the fucking clubhouse?*”

Okay, okay. Jesus. Mouth, meet brain. “No, that’s not—it’s just—” He stopped, started again. “If everyone knows you as my old lady, it means you’re a part of the, what, the nuclear family. Everybody watches out for you. Everybody is there when you need anything. No hesitation. It’s like the difference between how much you’d do for Garrett and how much you’d do for, like, a cousin.”

“I don’t have any cousins.”

“Frank, come on. You know what I mean. As long as I don’t claim you as my old lady, for whatever reason, it says that *I* am not totally committed to you. And if I’m not, they’re not. Understand?”

She was quiet, thinking. “Would it change anything—anything else, I guess?”

“You’d probably hear from Gemma more. I’m sure she’d ask you to help out with parties or whatever other social shit she’s got going on for the club. That’s what old ladies do. Run the clubhouse.”

He grabbed her hand and held it tight. “But it won’t change anything between us. Baby, you *are* my old lady. You just won’t let me tell anybody.”

She sighed and squeezed his hand. “*Fine*. I’m an old lady. Whoopee for me.”

*Thank you, God.* Grinning, he pulled her close and took her glasses off. Then he kissed the sass out of her. She pushed him back after a minute or two, and he was gratified to see her flushed and unfocused, breathing heavily.

She cleared her throat. “Okay, now. About this moving in thing.”

He cut in. He’d been thinking about this for a while. “There’s so much more room here—I’ve got rooms I don’t even use. The empty bedroom could be your studio. A whole room just for your art.”

“The light sucks in that room.”

“Okay, then, another room. We can rearrange. Or you can have the dining room, that’s empty—southern exposure, huge window. Or we can build you a studio in the back.”

“Jesus. You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to push too hard. But, God, he wanted this.

“There’s carpeting in every room. I get paint everywhere—oil paint. It would be a fucking mess.”

“We’ll rip the carpet out in any room you want—put down hardwood, or laminate, or linoleum, whatever you want. Hell, we could leave the subfloor exposed and you could go crazy.

“The Bendersons . . .”

She was starting to cast about for excuses, he could tell, and he was starting to feel some hope. “We can help the Bendersons find a good tenant who will take care of them just like you have.”

“Juice, I don’t—I love that apartment. It’s just my little private place.”

“You could have that here, baby. You want your studio to be just your space, I will never step one foot in it without your invite. Promise. You could even put a lock on the door if you wanted.”

She sat quietly for a few minutes; then she stood up. He did, too. She waved him off. “Stay put.” She went into the hallway.

He sat back down and waited. He thought he knew what she was doing, and he sat there and tried not to let himself get excited. He failed.

She was gone awhile. When she came back, she walked right up to him and straddled his lap. He put his hands on her hips, already grinning like a fool.

“I want your hacker room. It needs laminate flooring—cheap, so I can fuck it up without feeling guilty, but not ugly, so I can stand to be in the same room with it. And I want to be able to do something the fuck with the rest of this place. The feng here is so not shui. Like 90% of your posters have to go, or move, or at least get fucking framed. I’m serious. This place is like what thirteen-year-old boys imagine their house will look like when they grow up.”

## CHAPTER 22:

“With Me,” Sum 41

Garrett was on his feet and back to work part-time, which was good, because they needed somebody to mind the store while Frank and Marnie stripped Home Depot bare. Frank had given the Bendersons a month’s notice, and in that time, Juice had moved his gear into the smaller bedroom and laid new flooring down for Frank’s studio. While he was doing that, Frank painted the living room, kitchen, and their bedroom. For starters. She’d also taken down all of his posters. She’d framed the best ones. The Harley and better gaming posters she’d hung in the living room. The Transformers posters she’d hung in his new hacker room. Then, as a joke, she’d wallpapered the inside of the closet in his hacker room with the pornos, so he could get his lookies at big fake boobs that way. She’d also hung some of her own art throughout the house, though most of it would go on the walls of the studio.

The cardboard cutouts of Wolverine and Batman went to the hacker room, but the Stormtrooper went near the front door. Everyone should have a Stormtrooper at their front door, after all. So people—the right people—could come in and say, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for.” Obviously.

She had plans for the rest of the house, too, but she didn’t want to freak Juice out too much by making big changes to his house. For now, just some paint, some decorative rearranging, and the addition of the few pieces of furniture she had at the apartment. And the new studio.

She was a pretty freaked out herself about this whole thing. She was going to miss her little place with the wall of windows and the high, peaked ceiling. The place that had been just hers. And moving in with Juice seemed like a giant leap, one she hadn’t been thinking about making. They did spend most of their free time together, and his place was much the bigger. Living together would also give her a better sense of when he was out on a run with the club and when he was back and safe. It all made sense. But she still felt like she was giving up something important. Hopefully in exchange for something better, though.

Smeagol had only ever lived in that one room since she’d brought him home from the shelter. They’d taken him over right after they’d made the decision, and he’d hidden himself in a closet in a huff, only sneaking out for desperate potty and food breaks. He still wasn’t coming out to be with them, and Frank had finally given up and moved his bowls and litter box into her studio, so he could hide in there. She tried not to read it as a bad omen. It would just take them both a little while to adjust, that’s all.

Garrett’s place was getting a little redo, too. Marnie was moving in, and she was not okay with the House of Death. Seriously—who would be? She hadn’t asked for big changes, but they were redoing the bedroom, and Garrett was finally moving fully into it—now with Marnie.

Days when the shop was closed were all about the sawdust and paint fumes for awhile. And then, when the walls were painted and the flooring was laid, they all went to IKEA in Sacramento. They spent about a week building furniture. At the end, Frank had a pretty fucking amazing little

studio, and she thought she maybe could eventually get comfortable living in Juice's—*their*—house.

Still, moving day was really hard.

While Juice, Rat, and Chibs were moving furniture into the club van—Chibs complaining vociferously about the stairs—Frank was dallying over packing up her closet. It was huge, almost a room itself, with cubbies and shelves and drawers and its own window, and it was high on the long list of great things about the place. Fuck. She couldn't believe she was letting it go.

Juice came in alone. "Chibs and Rat are taking a break and going for food. Booze, too, I expect, so it'll be a little while. I'm gonna help you pack, because you have ADD today."

She smiled. "I know. I'm sorry. This is hard."

He came up behind her and put his arms around her. She loved how it felt to be wrapped up in those strong limbs, and she relaxed back against him, closing her eyes. He put his chin on her head. "I know, baby. But come on. This is going to be great. You and me." He leaned down and ran his tongue over the rings and studs in her ear, then whispered, "Always forward, right?"

Right. Always forward. On to the next thing. Okay. She turned in his embrace and put her arms around his neck. "Okay. I love you. Let's pack this shit and go home."

He leaned down and kissed her hard, setting her glasses askew. "Let's do this."

She had a big box open on the floor, still mostly empty. Juice went into the closet and came out with an armload of clothes on hangers. He dropped them into the box.

"Hey! Take some care!"

"We're going 4 miles. They'll be fine. Chibs is going to kick both our asses if we don't get this done, baby." He went in for another armload. She shook her head and began filling another box with shoes.

From deep in the closet she heard, "Whoa. What's this?" She went to the doorway. Juice was holding up a little denim vest covered with patches and pins, the shoulders tattered where she'd cut off the sleeves. He held it up, grinning, and turned it around. A red anarchy symbol was embroidered across the back. "Baby, you have a little tiny kutte! It's cute as hell!"

She hadn't seen that in a while—and Juice's reaction pissed her off. It was condescending as fuck. "Cute? Fuck you, asshole. It's not cute."

He walked up to her, holding the hanger, her old kutte dangling along his leg. "No, Frank, don't be mad. I just mean—I love it. It's so cool. It's sexy. And it *is* little, like you. Why don't you ever wear it?"

She didn't really know why she'd stopped. It hadn't really been a conscious decision, at least not that she recalled. She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess—well. I started wearing it in high school, toward the end of my senior year. I just tore up a jacket I had. I wore it every day for a couple of years, I guess, adding patches and pins the whole time. They all mean something—bands I liked or clubs or, you know, political shit, whatever. I did the patch on the back. I guess I felt like it said something about me. I'm not sure why I stopped wearing it."

She stopped. She was rambling and feeling weirdly defensive. "I just don't know, really. I just stopped. I haven't even thought about it in a while. And by the way, 'sexy' isn't a lot better than 'cute' here. *So* not the point."

He grinned and put his arms around her, still holding her kutte on its hanger. "You don't think mine's sexy—even though that's not the point?"

She grabbed his kutte in her fists. Yeah, she thought it was sexy. "I kinda think it's *part* of the point for yours. All you badass bikers and your Crow Eaters or sweetbutts or what the fuck ever. It's all sex and leather over there."

"Baby, I've been to Desi's. It's sex over there, too. I'm just saying—let's keep this where we can get to it, okay?"

OOO

The music was loud throughout the house, and Frank had been bopping around, unpacking. She was working on the bedroom now, getting her clothes organized. Juice had lots of empty space for her stuff—almost, but not quite, enough. They were going to need a dresser or something. She'd brought a chair into the walk-in closet so she could reach the shelves. She'd been shocked—though, once she thought about it for half a second she had no idea why she should be—to find a long row of guns, some huge and terrifying, arrayed on old bath towels on one of the shelves.

She was standing on the chair stacking clothes and stuff she didn't wear much, bouncing vaguely to the beat. She didn't see or hear Juice come in, so he gave her a start when he wrapped his arms around her thighs and lifted her off the chair. "What the fuck?"

"Time to take a break." He carried her to the bed. It was covered with piles of her clothes; he just knocked a bunch to the floor and laid her down, then came down on top of her.

"Aw, man. Seriously?" It had taken some time to sort those piles out.

"Oh, yeah. You've been bouncing around this house all afternoon in those teensy shorts and a tube top. You're like sex on a stick. I am deadly serious." He pulled her top down and sucked her pierced nipple into his mouth for emphasis.

*Fuck.* That never didn't feel awesome. She felt a hard throb between her legs and was instantly wet. She moaned. "Okay, then. Don't fuck around. Get naked and get in me."

“Baby, you live here now. You got no place else you need to be. I am taking my time.” He pulled her thrift-store gym shorts off, bringing the tube top with them. Then he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her up to his mouth.

He put the flat of his tongue right on her clit, pressing firmly, and then he, like, pulsed or something—not really licking, moving his tongue just barely over her but alternating the pressure like a heartbeat. *Jesus Christ*. Every nerve in her pelvis started to party. Where did he learn to *do* these things? And how was he always coming up with more? Did he look it up online or something?

Whatever. She tightened her legs around his head and began grinding on him, moaning, but he pulled back, shifting his hands to hold her still.

“Settle down, baby. Let me do this. It’ll be better if you just let yourself feel it. I’ll get you there, promise.”

*Settle down, he says. Fuck.* But she did. She relaxed and let him do his thing. It wasn’t easy. Her whole body was telling her to move, to speed up, to get closer. But she let him take his time. And damn, it was good. His tongue was firm and soft against her and driving her mad. She was moaning non-stop now. He didn’t want her to move, but he didn’t say anything about being loud.

She was getting closer, so close. Every now and then her hips would spasm, but every time, he held them still. He was keeping her right on the edge. She needed to fucking move or something. “Fuck, Juice,” she gasped. “Please. *Please*.” He chuckled against her clit and she cried out at the vibration.

Then he sucked on her clit as he slid his fingers into her and pumped. He couldn’t hold her still any longer; she surged down on his fingers, trying to get them as deep as she could. She had the blankets bunched up in her fists. She kept coming; she thought she might just go crazy if it didn’t stop.

As she was finally over the peak and beginning to relax, Juice planted a kiss on her clit and sat back, grinning. “Told ya.”

“You are fucking arrogant, you know that, right?” The way she was gasping for breath, she was maybe not as convincing as she’d like.

He raised his eyebrows at her, his grin getting positively devilish. “You think so, huh?” He grabbed her hips and flipped her over, like nothing. It surprised the hell out of her; it usually did. But she loved it.

She came up to her knees right away. He slid two fingers into her. “Fuck, baby, I love the way you feel. I can still feel you throbbing.”

She sucked in a breath and rocked back on his hand. He slid his fingers out and back up along her cleft. He circled her anus—he'd never done that before, and she flinched. She didn't stop him, though, at least not yet. It felt really good, actually, but she was nervous. She didn't want to go down that road. That road scared her. He leaned down and kissed her there. She flinched again, harder. Yeah, she was going to have to back him off. "Wait—Juice, no."

"No, baby. It's okay. I'm not doing more. You're too little. I just wanted you to feel my touch there. But I'll stop now."

Well, she wasn't sure she wanted a full stop, especially if he didn't plan to go further. "You don't have to stop if you don't want to—just, nothing more, okay? But it feels good."

He slid a finger into her core, then gently drew it back up to make circles. It felt pretty fucking amazing, really. At the same time, he slid his cock home and sat back on his heels, bringing her onto his lap, her chest still on the bed. This was a *great* angle. Damn. She clenched hard around him and rose up on her elbows so she could rock on him. This time, he let her move, let her set the rhythm, while he used his finger, and then his thumb, and then both thumbs to caress her back there.

His caress made a whole new set of muscles and nerves wake up, and she was starting to feel woozy from the pleasure. She had to come, and she had to do it now. She picked up the pace, driving back against him. He started grunting hard. She loved that; it meant he was fighting to maintain. She sat up, against his chest, bringing him in deeper, even though she lost contact with his fingers. He gasped, "Oh, fuck, you feel good," and wrapped his arms tight around her. She grabbed one of his hands and pressed it between her legs. She came as soon as he pressed his fingers to her clit. She reached up with her other arm and grabbed his head, arching back against him. He came right after her with a long, loud groan.

OOO

They were curled together in bed late that night. Juice was propped up against the wall (headboard was on Frank's to-do list), and Frank was resting against him at an angle, her shoulders and head on his chest. He was combing his fingers through her long, loose hair. She closed her eyes and relaxed into the sensation, one of her favorites. These days her hair was a ruddy auburn, the closest she'd been to what she recalled as her natural color in years—not that it was all that close.

They were on the same wavelength, because he asked, "What color is your hair naturally?"

She laughed a little. "I was just thinking about that. I'm not really sure. My peach fuzz before I shave my scalp is kinda ginger. My roots too, though I don't really let roots happen. I was a strawberry blonde before I started coloring it. But I haven't let it be natural for a very long time. Maybe like Garrett's, maybe with a little more red in it? Why? You want me to stop coloring it?"

“No, I like you the way you are. I was just curious. Feels like something I should know about my old lady. You should do what you want with your hair—though I might be a little bummed if you ever lost your ponytail, because I love running my fingers through it.” He kissed her head.

“Well, I’d pretty much have to lose the pony to go natural, at least until it grew out again. I’d have to go really short.”

“Why’d you start coloring it?”

She turned so she could look at him. He was all about the third degree tonight. “You’re suddenly really interested in my hair. You have a problem with it?”

He sighed. “Don’t get defensive, baby. Please. I think you’re beautiful, and I love the way you look. I’m totally into you—or has that not been clear? I’m not *suddenly* interested in anything. I’ve always been interested in everything. I’ve just never asked before.”

She tamped down her combative reflexes, wondering if it was ever going to get easier to talk intimately with him, to share things. She should be able to with Juice, of all people. That’s what a relationship was, right?

She settled back on his chest. “It’s not that easy a question. Starting to color my hair is all part of a big, messy teenage drama that I don’t want to get into—not more, anyway. You know enough. But I guess the short answer is I didn’t want to be like anybody else, and I wanted everybody to leave me alone. Being a freak got me what I wanted. People who liked me anyway were worth my time. Not many people like that, though.”

He was quiet for a long time. She’d have thought he’d gone to sleep, except that his hand was running softly up and down her arm. Then he whispered, “I love you, Frank. Always. I mean it. Always.”

She caught his hand in hers and linked fingers with him. “I love you, too.”

OOO

Frank and Garrett were working together at the shop, not long after they’d both settled in to their new living arrangements. Big changes for them both. Frank thought it felt weird, somehow. Even though she’d moved out of the House of Death years ago, this was the move that felt like she was leaving her brother. She didn’t like it. She never wanted anyone or anything between them, but in the past couple of months it felt like there was a lot in there.

Garrett was doing really well, though. He was pretty much back to normal, healthwise. And having Marnie in his life had made him lighter. Frank would never have said Garrett was heavy or dark before, but still, he was happier, quicker to laugh. Like the cool he’d been before had really been control. Now, though, he was loose and mellow.

It was Marnie, yeah. But suddenly Frank knew something else: it was *her*. Or, rather, not-her. He wasn't responsible for her anymore. He could get on with his life. It's what she wanted for him, but all at once she felt like she was losing something really important: who'd catch her if she fell?

Juice? Would he? Always? He said so, but did she trust him with that kind of power? She wasn't sure yet.

"You okay, sissy? You are zoned way out. Something on your mind?" He came up behind the counter and put his hand on her shoulder.

She shook her heavy thoughts off and smiled. "I'm good. Just taking a brain nap."

Garrett looked around; the shop was empty. He sat down on a stool. "Well, there's something on my mind. Can we talk for a sec?"

Something in the way he was looking at her put her on alert. She hoped she was wrong. "Um, yeah, I guess."

He looked down at the floor for a second, and Frank knew. "Aw, Garrett, no. Please."

"Sissy. I've been trying for weeks and weeks not to say anything. First because you didn't know I knew, and then because it hurts you so much that I do."

She cut him off. "Yeah, it does, Garry. I hate it. So shut the fuck up right now. *Please*."

"I can't. I have to say something."

"Fuck you!" She turned, intending to hide in the back. She couldn't fucking believe he was pushing this. *Why would no one leave this the fuck alone?!* For more than four years it had been locked safely away, and now everywhere she turned it was right in front of her.

He took her arm and wouldn't let go.

She turned hard and yanked away. She pushed him back, instantly feeling bad when he winced a little, but she was too upset to apologize yet. "What about what *I* can't do? Like talk about it or think about it? What doesn't that count for anything?"

He put his hands gently but insistently on her shoulders. "I only want to say this, and then I will never, ever say another word about it unless you want me to: You are the strongest, most amazing person I've ever known. I am so sorry it happened, and I am so sorry I couldn't protect you from it or help you through it. You got through it on your own, though, and you are *amazing*. You are a warrior. I am proud of you. I'm *in awe* of you. The only thing I see when I look at you, the only thing I think of when I think of you, is you—my beautiful, fierce sister who I'm so lucky to have in my life. I love you, sissy. That's all I wanted to say."

She leaned into his chest and wept.

## CHAPTER 23:

### “Unsatisfied,” The Replacements

“Okay, good. Now take your breath—no, keep your eyes open, on your target—and squeeze.” She was still letting the recoil own her. But she’d hit the paper this time, anyway—if she was aiming for a headshot, she might manage to wing somebody.

He was standing behind her, a little to the side, and he gave her hips a squeeze. “Good job, baby. Better.”

“I still cannot believe I’m letting you make me do this. Fucking guns.”

She’d fought him like crazy when he told her he wanted her to learn how to shoot, and though he’d finally gotten her to agree, she was being belligerent about it. But Tara and Lilli had been attacked last month, not long after Frank’s party, and Lilli had almost died. Watching Opie in the hospital, facing the chance that he would lose another woman he loved, scared the hell out of Juice. Frank’s bad attitude wasn’t self-defense enough, so he’d brought home a little .38 for her. So far, though, her insults had way better aim.

“Ow. Fuck. This hurts. My hands are getting numb. And you’re a fucking moron if you think I’m going to remember to do all these things before I shoot when some asshole is coming up on me.”

“You’re supposed to practice until you don’t have to remember anymore. It’s muscle memory. You have to build it up. Also, you’re whining. Just sayin’.”

“Fuck you. How about a knife? I’d be good with a knife.”

He stepped around to face her, taking the gun out of her hands to reload. He was pretty pissed and really over this fight. They’d been having it every time he brought her to shoot. “Be serious, Frank. This is important.”

“Who says I’m not? I hate everything about guns. Especially now that you’re making me shoot one. It sucks. They’re loud and they hurt and they’re hard to aim. My luck, I’d hit an innocent bystander or a stray kitten or some shit. A knife is so much more my style.”

He almost laughed—she was totally right. Sadly, that wasn’t really practical. “You really want to get that close to someone who wants to hurt you before you can defend yourself? Say a guy running 250 or so, when you manage to get to 105 on a good day? You’d need a fucking sword to stop that guy.”

“Lilli’s a crack shot, and that didn’t help her.”

“Fuck, Frank. Can we please stop arguing about this? Please. Let me up here. It’s important. This is the life. I can’t always protect you. The club can’t, either. You need to be at least good enough with this little gun to be able to slow somebody down. Please. Just do this for me. Just please quit fighting it.”

Frank sighed heavily. “*Fine*. Still sucks, though.”

“Trust me, baby, I’m not having any fun, either.”

OOO

He walked by her studio that afternoon. The door was open, which was rare. She’d taken him up on the idea of this being her private place and usually kept it closed. She’d also installed a lock, though to his knowledge she hadn’t yet actually locked him out. She just wanted the option, he guessed.

The studio really was great. She’d sketched out plans for it, and they’d gotten it close. The room had a big window, which she’d cleaned thoroughly and stripped of any blinds or curtains, so that the light streamed in. She’d placed her easel to make the most of that light. The new floor was light and sturdy, and they’d installed great cubbies and shelves for her supplies. She had her turntable and records in here, too. She’d brought the drafting table from her room at Garrett’s—she’d told him it was the first piece of furniture she’d ever taken out of that house—and she had her futon. The walls were covered with canvases and sketches. She loved it. She spent a lot of time in here.

Now he stood in the doorway and watched her paint. All he saw was smears of reddish paint on the canvas, but he watched her place those smears carefully, using a little trowel-looking thing, applying the paint thickly but precisely, layering colors.

She kept rolling her right shoulder. Learning to shoot really was hard on her. Even the recoil of that little gun bit her pretty hard. He knocked on the jamb. “Hey, baby.”

She turned and smiled. “Hey. Sorry I was such a jerk today. I do get the whole gun thing. I hate it, but I get it. I wish there was just a download, though, like the Matrix—‘I can hit a bullseye,’ like ‘I know kung fu.’”

“I know. You’ll get better, though. Thank you for doing it. And I hope to God you never have to use it, anyway. Is your shoulder bugging you?”

She shrug. “Meh. It’s fine.”

“You sure? I’m offering a massage over here. Discount rates.”

“Huh. *It is* a little tweaked, if I was going to be *completely* honest.” She grinned.

“Well, close up your paints and meet me in the bedroom, then.”

He was sitting on the bed, propped on the wall, his shirt off but his pants on, when she came in carrying her sketchbook. She stood just in the doorway for a couple of seconds, looking a little shy.

“What’s up, baby?”

“Can I show you something, get your take on it?”

“Sure. I don’t know how much my opinion is going to count with art stuff, but sure.”

She climbed up on the bed and knelt on her heels facing him. “I’ve been working on the next part of my tattoo. I want to do something, but I’m afraid it’s not right. There’s a lot of reasons it could be really wrong. So I want to see what you think before I ink it into my back. Would you take a look and give me your honest perspective?”

That felt like a booby-trapped request, but, “Okay. I’ll do what I can. I can’t imagine I won’t like it, though.”

She flipped open the sketchbook and handed it to him. On the page she’d turned up were two sketches. One was of her own back, showing the ink she already had and the placement of the new section, which would be, scaled to size, about 8 or 10 square inches. The other, larger sketch was an actual-size mock-up of the tat, in pointillism. It was a crow, beautifully and abstractly rendered, placed to swoop at a downward angle across her back. The abstract shapes of her current tat would blend into the tail feathers of the crow.

It was gorgeous, and his first reaction upon seeing it was exhilaration. He hadn’t yet figured out how to broach the topic of a crow tattoo, and here she was broaching it for him. It was a huge commitment—far more than moving in. But then he wondered if she knew that, if that’s what she intended. “Frank, it’s so beautiful. But do you know what it means—what it will mean to the MC?”

She looked at him, her brow wrinkled a little. No, she didn’t. That was a disappointing, though not altogether surprising. He’d have to explain. “We haven’t talked about it yet, but old ladies get club tats. Gemma has the crow on her chest. Tara has a big crow on her lower back. I don’t know about Lilli, but if she doesn’t have one, she probably will soon. It’s kinda like, I don’t know . . . It’s a mark. This would be seen as my mark on you. My permanent mark. It’s more serious than a ring. Are you ready for that?”

“You mean like a *brand*? Like I’m a fucking cow?”

And that’s why he hadn’t said anything yet. He searched for a better way to explain, but he was coming up empty. If he’d known how to talk about this with her, he would have brought the subject up himself.

She took the sketchbook back from him and looked at her drawings. “I wanted this because it’s my story, not yours. I was worried it would piss people—you—off, like I was appropriating one of your symbols. I wanted it because you’re such a big part of my life, and the crow is part of my journey, now, too. But I don’t want to be owned. That’s whack. I’m sorry, but that’s whack.”

“Yeah, it is. But you don’t need to think of it like that. I mean, yeah, some guys do. But I don’t. It’s a serious commitment, though.”

“All tattoos are serious commitments, Juice.” He hated when she did that, tried to point a conversation away from the real topic. It meant she was on her way to defensive, which meant a fight was brewing.

“I’m not talking about the commitment to the ink, and you know it. I’m talking about the commitment to—” To him, but he didn’t want to put it so bluntly; the fight was lurking right in there. “To the reason for the ink.” He saw her struggling, feeling uncomfortable and confused. He took her hand. “You asked for my honest perspective, baby. It’s a gorgeous tattoo, and I would *love* for you to have it. It would make me really happy. But I think you should wait until you’re 100% sure about the reason before you ink a crow into your skin.”

“Where’s your permanent symbol of your commitment to *me*, then?”

He took her hands in his. “Baby, I will go right now and have your name inked in six-inch letters across my chest: ‘Property of Frank’.” He grinned. “Could start some really interesting conversations at Lumpy’s, don’t you think?”

She met his eyes and held them for a few seconds. Then she looked back down at her sketches and nodded. “Okay. I need to think. I’m sorry.” She closed her sketchbook, got off the bed, and headed for the door.

He stood up. “Don’t you want me to rub your shoulder?” He was disappointed about the tat, a little hurt, but he also understood. She was young, and things were already moving fast for her. Rushing her more would backfire. It would happen. He wanted to let this drop without a lot of angst between them.

She stopped and turned. “Didn’t I just really hurt your feelings? I thought you’d be mad.”

“Wait. You came in afraid I’d be mad because you wanted the tat, and now you’re afraid I’m mad because you don’t?” He chuckled. “Baby, sometimes I need a map with you. I’m not mad. I get it. I’ll be happy for you to get a crow tat, but I can wait. I love you. I know you love me. You’re here. Take your time. But I’d like to get my hands on you right now, so it’d be great if you’d hurry your sweet little ass over here.”

She laughed, a full, unrestrained sound. He loved that laugh, and it was especially great in this moment, as the tension that had been building up evaporated. “Hold up. You offered to rub my sore shoulder so you could get me naked? This is foreplay? Ulterior motives? And here I thought you were just being nice.”

He grinned and took her hand. “Oh, I’ll be real nice, don’t worry.”

OOO

“What do you think about heading up to Sac tonight, seeing Desi, playing a little?” She was leaning against the wall between the living room and the kitchen, a dish towel in her hand. Juice cooked, Frank cleaned up; that was their arrangement.

A few content, uneventful days had passed since they’d talked about the crow tat. He answered without looking away from his game. “Um, I don’t know. Not really into it tonight.”

She came in and flopped down on the couch next to him. “What’s going on? You haven’t been into it in a long time. Don’t you want to roll with me? It’s always awesome.”

For her, yeah. He paused the game and shifted on the couch to face her. “I need to tell you something about all that. But I need you to let me finish before you get mad. Okay?”

“That’s how you want to start a conversation you don’t want me to get mad about? You suck at this. You just told me to go ahead and get pissed without even knowing what you’re going to say.”

Fuck, she loved to make everything hard. “Fine, be mad right away. Whatever. But please just shut up and let me say this.”

Her eyebrows went sky high, but she shut up. Okay. This was going to suck. “I don’t want to go to Desi’s. I don’t want you to go to Desi’s. Anymore. Ever.” There. Now her speculative anger was quickly morphing into the real thing. But she stayed quiet.

“I don’t understand who she is to you. I was really surprised she was at your graduation. She told me that day you were like a daughter to her, which I think is a little weird, considering. But okay, I guess that means that you’re important to her in some way, and probably vice versa. And that just makes everything I feel worse.”

He paused and sorted out the next bit, which made him anxious to say, especially since she was starting to send out a radioactive vibe. “Baby, it hurts me a lot to see you with her. I’m sorry. I’m really jealous. I told you that before, and it hasn’t gotten better. It’s like you’re cheating on me when I’m right there with you. Jesus, when I’m inside you. I can’t deal. I need it to stop. If you want to roll, I’ll roll with you, but we can do it here.”

He stopped talking and watched the emotions playing across her face. He couldn’t read them all, but he was about to get a blast, he was sure. He braced himself, then said, “Thank you for letting me get that out.”

Her voice was low and shaking when she spoke. “My turn now? Good, because I have a few sections to my answer. First, thanks for making me out to be a big slut. That’s awesome. I don’t understand how I can be cheating on you while you’re inside me. You’re involved, too—because, you know, *you’re inside me*. I don’t go there without you. Second, you like to watch, right? Girl-on-girl gets you off. How am I being a cheating whore if I’m giving you what you want?”

He cut in. “I would *never* call you a slut or a whore, Frank. Jesus. That’s not what I meant at all. I don’t think anything like that, and it’s fucking unfair for you to say so. I only treat you with love and respect, and you know it. Watching porn stars get each other off is totally different from watching somebody else all over *my* girl. I don’t want *anyone* else touching you. Desi and I hardly touch each other. We’re both there for you. And sometimes I’m not that involved in what’s going on with you. I don’t like it. It surprises me, too, to be honest. But I can’t deal.”

She glared at him; her face was getting flushed. “You want to touch her, then touch her! I wouldn’t stop you! It’s a three-way—that’s the fucking point!”

“I *don’t* want to touch her. I only want you. I think that’s *my* point.” *Come on, baby. Get with me here. Please understand.*

Her voice was shaking even more now. She was practically panting. He hadn’t seen her this angry since the night Garrett brought him to the shop. The night they got together. “You know that Desi was the first person I let touch me after high school? She’s the reason I’m not a frigid hag hiding under a rock someplace.”

He’d assumed something of the sort. “I’m not saying she’s not a wonderful person. And I’m grateful to her, too, then. But if you have that kind of bond with her and it’s about sex, then I *really* don’t think I’m overreacting to be jealous. Baby, listen to me. I’m telling you that it hurts me when you’re with Desi. I tried to be okay with it, and I can’t.”

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?” Her tone suggested that doing so would be a bad idea. But he needed this.

“I guess so. I’m owed one, as I remember. I don’t ask you for much, Frank.”

And then came the blast. “Are you fucking kidding me? You think you’re *owed*? You monitor what I eat. You took away my apartment. You make me shoot guns I hate. You made me your fucking old lady, your fucking *property*. Shit, you want to *brand* me! Now you’re taking away Desi and the last fucking place I feel totally comfortable. You ask for *everything*, motherfucker. And I fucking give it to you, because it turns out I’m a fucking doormat. Let me know when you want that pound of fucking flesh. I’ll be sure to carve it off my ass, so you can KISS IT!”

She was up and on her way down the hall before he could react. He went after her, but she slammed the door to her studio. Then he heard the lock turn.

Jesus Christ. That went so much worse than he’d even thought. He stood in the hallway, trying to decide if he should leave her alone or try to get her to talk. The acid she’d just spewed shocked and scared him. It exposed resentments he had no idea about. He should have, though. He’d gotten so used to fighting with her, he’d stopped thinking about what she was fighting for.

He knocked. “Frank, come out and talk to me, please.”

She kicked the door. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

He leaned on the jamb, his head down. “I love you, baby. I’m sorry. I’ll be out here when you want to talk.”

She kicked the door again, and it emitted a significant cracking sound. He went back to the living room and sat on the sofa. He turned the TV off.

He sat there for a long time, while the room grew dark around him. He just sat there and thought, wondering how badly he’d been fucking up while he was trying so hard to take care of her and make her happy. He really had no idea what he was doing. Why couldn’t he figure out what she needed? Christ, he was tired.

Then he heard the door open. It scraped against the jamb; she must have knocked it out of true with her kicks. He sat up a little and waited to see if she’d come talk to him.

It took her awhile, but she came. She leaned against the wall, the same place she’d been when the fight started. The room was dark, only the light from the streetlights or the moon, if there was one, coming through the windows. She didn’t say anything at first. She just leaned there, her arms crossed. He was glad she’d come out on her own, so he turned toward her and waited for her to do or say what she needed.

Eventually, she spoke, quietly. “You manage me. You’re trying to make me into something different. If you don’t want me like I am, why do you want me at all?”

He waited to make sure she was done before he answered. “I love the way you are. I love you so much, baby. You’re my whole life. I don’t mean to change you. I just want you to be happy and healthy and safe, and I want you to have that with me.”

She turned on the floor lamp and sat down on the end of the sofa, about as far away from him as she could get. “I feel like I had this life that was working. It wasn’t much of a life, I know. But it was mine, and it worked. But now all of the things I liked about that life are gone or upside down, like somebody came through with a bulldozer, and I’m standing in the rubble trying to make the stuff that’s left into something livable.”

And he was the guy driving the dozer. Jesus, that was a harsh way to describe the life she was making with him. “Frank. I’m sorry. I never meant to do anything like that. But is that really how it feels for you to be with me?”

She sighed. “I love you. I want a life with you. I wish I didn’t. You can tell I want you because I’ve let you do all this. I’ve gone along with it, given you what you want, instead of telling to fuck off and find someone who wants to be fixed. Because that’s what you’re doing. You’re fixing me. Something about me you wish was different, you fix that. I have a problem, you fix it. Somebody hurts me, you fix them. Which maybe sounds great to you. I guess you think you’re taking care of me. Maybe it would sound great to another girl. But not to me. I know I’m fucked up. But I need the chance to fix myself, the stuff *I* think needs fixing.

“And sometimes your fixes make things worse. It would have been so much better for me if you’d just left Jordan and those guys alone. But you wanted to make them pay, even when I told you not to, and you told Garrett because making them pay was more important than me.”

“No, baby. That’s not it at all. Nothing’s more important than you are to me.” He wondered if he would ever be able to make up for telling Garrett, if she would ever really forgive him.

She regarded him quietly for a moment. “If that was true, you would have kept my secret. Because *that* is what I needed. I told you that, and you ignored me. You say I fight you too much, and I know I get mad fast. But I never win. All I have is the fight. You take everything else.”

His heart was pounding in his chest. She was leaving him. He couldn’t imagine this going anywhere else. How the *fuck* had he screwed this up so badly? All he thought about was making her happy. He wore himself out thinking about it, worrying about her. Jesus motherfucking Christ. He took a breath, clinging to one sentence: *I want a life with you*. “What do you want to do, Frank?”

“I want to be in a relationship with someone who sees me as more than just a broken little girl. I want to know if that can be you.”

He came off the couch onto his knees and crawled over to her. He put his hands on her knees, and his head in her lap. “Yes. *Yes*. That *is* me. I’m so sorry I’ve made you feel like that, baby. I love you—I love *you*. I’m trying so hard to take good care of you. I didn’t mean to take over so much. I don’t think of you as broken. You’re strong. I’m stronger because of you.”

She put her hands on his head, scratching gently through his mohawk. “Okay, then,” she whispered. He closed his eyes, exhausted and relieved.

OOO

She was painting new house numbers near the front door when he pulled into the driveway a few days later. They were ornate and funky and looked pretty cool. She was starting to make bigger changes to the rest of the house now, since that big fight. That was great with him; she was trying to settle in, make it her place, too. She put the brush down and walked over as he was parking in the carport. He took off his helmet, but before he could dismount, she climbed on, straddling his lap.

“Hiya.” She put her arms over his shoulders and kissed him. It was the kind of kiss that said she had plans for him. He grabbed her ass and kissed her back in kind, pressing her tight to him. He couldn’t be sorry she’d given up her apartment. It was so great to have her here, to have this be her home, so that he could come home to her.

“Mmm. Hi, baby. I like the welcome.”

“I’m glad you’re home. I missed you.” She wiggled on him, making him groan. He looked around. Assuming the neighbors directly across the street weren’t staring at them through their blinds, they were pretty secluded back here.

He could feel her heat through their clothes as she wiggled. “You’re making me wish you didn’t have so many clothes on.” He was becoming consumed by the thought of fucking her on his Dyna, and he slid his hand into the leg of her shorts and under the elastic band of her underwear. When he reached her folds and felt her wetness, he groaned again. He slid a finger along her, and she arched back with a little whimper. He pressed his lips against her neck. “I want you now, baby. Right now. Right here.”

She gave him a wry smile and got off the bike. She cast a little look around and then wiggled out of her shorts and underwear. Meanwhile, he opened his pants and pulled himself free. He held himself steady as she mounted him and slid down onto his lap.

She was staring at him, her eyes wide and deep. She flexed on him once, hard. He moaned and almost closed his eyes, but there was something about the way she was looking at him that he didn’t want to lose. She flexed again.

He clutched her ass and lifted her up a couple of inches, then set her back down, making her move on him. “Come on, baby.” She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and started to rock fast, canting her hips as she came down, driving him deep into her. He groaned. “Yeah, that’s it. You feel so good.”

She rocked, and he held on, and they kept eye contact the whole time. It wasn’t long before he felt her start to tense and shiver, and he knew she was close. She bit her lower lip and moaned, her eyes flaring. She whispered, “I love you,” and then it was a mantra as she came, “I love you, I love you, I love you, oh, god, I love you.”

Frank didn’t bandy those words about. For every time she told him she loved him, he told her easily three times more. Juice knew that orgasmic utterances weren’t the most reliable, but everything about this moment—how she’d come up to him, the way she was looking at him, her willingness to do this in the open, all of it—told him that he was seeing into her right now, and that they could get clear of the resentments and hurts their last fight had exposed.

Sometimes he had to go looking for signs that Frank was really with him. Right now, though, in this moment, it was clear as day. Despite everything, she was here. She was his.

That realization pushed him over, and he grabbed her hips and rose up on his feet to thrust into her as he came.

## CHAPTER 24:

### “Love You Till the End,” The Pogues

Frank knelt in the middle of the dining room floor, fighting with her staple gun. She'd taken a big stack of her oldest, most tattered band and political t-shirts and had absconded with several of Juice's SAMCRO and Reaper Crew shirts as well. She'd cut them up and hand pieced and batted them, and now she was trying to affix the resulting quilt to a plywood headboard she'd built. Juice was in Arizona on a run, and she wanted to surprise him when he got home. But it was proving to be harder than she'd expected to get the staples snug and flat in the wood using her little craft gun.

She pushed her glasses up her nose and sat back with an irritated huff, almost landing on Smeagol, who was sitting placidly in a sunbeam behind her. As far as she knew, this was his first venture out of her studio. He blinked at her a couple of times, and then he stuck his rear leg in the air and licked his butt. She laughed.

“Hey, Smee. Glad to see you, buddy. Want a cookie?” She stood up and headed to the kitchen for the cat treats. She glanced out the window and saw the mail truck pulling away, so she fed her cat a few treats and went to see what got sent.

As usual, most of it was crap, but there was one interesting piece, addressed to her in a thin, elegant hand. It had been sent to her apartment, and a yellow forwarding address sticker covered the bottom part of the envelope. She tore it open. Inside was a check made out to her.

In the amount of \$10,000.

The check was signed by Martin Hahn. There was also a business card, creamy cardstock with raised indigo lettering in an austere font: Hahn-Friedman Gallery, San Francisco. On the back was a short note, in the same thin hand as the address on the envelope: “Please call—M.H.”

OOO

Garrett looked up from the pull files, eyebrows raised. “Hey, sissy. You're way early.”

“Yeah, I know. I need to talk to you.” She looked around the shop. There were a few browsers in the comics and a group of teen boys by the games. She couldn't wait for the store to clear. She went behind the counter and handed him the envelope from Martin Hahn. “This came in the mail today.”

Looking curious and confused, Garrett took the envelope and slid the check out of it. His eyes went wide, and then he looked at her with a huge grin. “Is this for your paintings?”

“One. It's for *one* painting—and after his commission. He asked me to call him, and I did. He said there's been interest in *me*, and he asked me if I had enough paintings for a *show*. Garry, he wants to do a solo show of my stuff.”

“Holy shit, sis! That’s amazing! Does Juice know? You said yes, right? Of course you said yes.”

“Juice is on a run. He won’t be back until the day after tomorrow.” Garrett laughed then, a little sharply, and derailed Frank from the rest of what she was going to say. “Something funny?”

His smile was lopsided. “It just struck me as funny, the way you said, ‘Juice is on a run.’ Like somebody else would say, ‘Bob is at a conference.’ You lead a weird life, sissy.”

“Fuck you, Garry. You’re the one who made the big show of getting us together—*twice*. So it’s your fault, really.”

“Hey now, not talking about fault. You gotta admit your life is not normal, though. So, you’re doing the show, right?”

She had more pressing matters to discuss, so she took a pass on the fight about her weird life. “I haven’t said yes or no. I need to talk it out with you. It’s complicated. He also wants me to work at his gallery. He says I need to be part of a ‘community of artists’—that’s how he said it—or my ‘talent might atrophy’—also his words. He did some lecture about the history of patrons of the arts or whatever, but the gist was that the person who bought my painting has an apartment she would let me live in free—in *North Beach*—and I could work at Hahn’s gallery for living expenses.

“Garry, Hahn wants me to move to San Francisco and paint. What the fuck do I do?”

Her brother stared at her, processing. “Jesus, sis! That’s so incredibly great. I’m so proud of you.”

She waved him off impatiently. “Thanks, Garry. But I need help. I just moved in with Juice. I love him. We’re trying to build something together. I have to say no to Hahn, right? At least to the moving part, and hope that he’ll still do the show? But God! San Francisco! An apartment and a job waiting for me there. The chance to really paint and, like, *be an artist*. For real. How do I say no to that? Fuck, I’m dying here. Help me!”

Garrett put his arm around her and pulled her close. “Sissy, you’re the only one who can make this decision. But I’ll tell you three things. First, calm down and think it through. Try not to just jump. Either decision is a huge one, not easily undone. Second, try to think about what the most important things are in your life. What are the things that would make your life emptier if they were gone? Third, you’re 23. This is the time to think of yourself first when you make big life decisions. When you’re older and have kids or whatever, you won’t be able to do that. So don’t think of anyone else until you figure out what *you* want.”

She crossed her arms, dissatisfied with that advice. “Garry, it would be so much better if you would just tell me what the right thing is. I am terrified.”

“Easier, maybe, but not better. Only you can make this decision. I love you, Frank. No matter what you decide, your life will be full and bright and fascinating. Because *you* are.” He kissed

the side of her head. “Sorry, but that’s all the advice I’ve got for you, brat. Now, get out of here; I’ll close. I’ll call Marnie to come hang out with me here. You have stuff to figure out.”

He hugged her close. “I love you, sissy. You’ll make the right call, I know it.”

“Thanks. I love you, too.” She headed out. She had things to think about, things to do.

She went home, her brain churning nonstop. She actually sat down and made pro/con lists—not at all her style, but she needed to get some of the thoughts out of her head where she could see them. Finally, after working through all the possible futures she could imagine, she called Martin Hahn.

After she ended that call, she went through her contacts list and placed another.

“Little Frank! Hey! Too long since I seen this number on my phone. ‘Sup, sweets?”

“Hey, Toad. Got a minute? I need to run an idea past you.”

“Go for it.” She explained what she needed.

Toad’s answer was immediate. “For you, I’ll clear my schedule. You know that’s an all-day sucker, though, right?”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll order in lunch for us.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow morning, then. Gotta tell you, I’m excited.”

OOO

She went out to the carport when she heard Juice’s bike roaring down the street. He’d been gone four days—the longest run he’d been on since they’d been a couple. He started grinning as soon as he saw her. He took off his helmet and swung off the bike. “Hey, baby. I really missed you”

She grabbed his hands and stepped up against him. “I missed you so much. I’m glad you’re home safe.” He leaned down and kissed her. They kissed deeply, their tongues moving in a now-familiar rhythm, until Frank pulled back. “Come inside. I want to show you something.”

She led him into the bedroom. She’d finished and installed the headboard. “Wow, baby. What’s this?” He got close. She’d cut out the logos and images from the tattered shirts for the pieces and had left any tears intact, even pulling on the batting a little to pull strands through. She thought it looked pretty cool, but it wasn’t something anyone was going to find in a furniture store. That was the point, really.

He noticed the Reaper and SAMCRO pieces. “Are these my shirts?”

She got a little shy. “Yeah. Sorry I didn’t ask. I pulled from the bottom of your stack, and I’ll get you new ones. I just wanted ones you’d worn a lot. I wanted both of us in it.”

“No, I love it, baby. It’s awesome! Did you do all this while I was gone?” He came back to her, and she took his hands again.

“I’ve been working on the piecing for a while. I turned it into a headboard while you were gone.”

“It’s amazing. My favorite thing you’ve done here.” He kissed her. He tried to pull her close, but she backed away. “There’s more.” She pushed him back and turned around, her back to him. Then she unbuttoned her plaid shirt and dropped it off her shoulders.

He was silent. She’d intended to be still and wait for him to say or do something, but he was frying her nerves with his silence.

Then he was on his knees behind her, his arms tight around her hips, his face pressed against her side. He was shaking slightly—fuck, he was crying. That was good, though, right? Right? Was that good?

She couldn’t stand it anymore. “Is it okay?” she whispered.

He stayed on his knees, but he turned her around in his arms and looked up at her, his eyes shining. “It’s the most beautiful, amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Oh my God, Frank. I love you so much. You’re mine. You’re mine.”

She put her hands on his head. “Yeah, I am.”

He stood up and took her face in his hands. He kissed her. With his forehead to hers, he said, “Thank you, baby. When did you do it?”

“Yesterday.”

He turned her back around so he could see her new crow tattoo again, the one she’d designed. “You did it all yesterday? How long did it take?”

“A little more than eight hours, plus a lunch break. Pointillism takes some time. It wasn’t too bad, though. I’ve never really minded how getting tattooed feels. The parts right on my spine weren’t much of a picnic, but otherwise it was fine.”

“Jesus, you’re a tough little thing. It must be sore as hell.”

“I won’t lie. I slept on my stomach last night.”

“You have goo for it, right? Can I help with that?”

“I was hoping you would. Though it’s kinda funny watching what I have to do to put it on myself. Might be good for a laugh.”

“Who did it? Somebody in Charming?”

“Nope. I went to Sac. Toad’s a big star there—that’s his real job. He only bounces for Desi because it gives him a legit reason to rough d-bags up. He did it.”

Juice got a vaguely weird expression and asked, “Toad do all your ink?”

Ah, she understood the expression now. “He did the all the pointillism and the binary on my scalp. A woman did the knot. No one I’m friends with. Chill out.”

He grinned. “Just checking. Where’s your goo?”

She stripped and lay on her stomach on the bed while he went to the bathroom for the tattoo ointment. Getting the tat had help her lock in her decision, and Juice’s reaction to it helped her to feel right about the choice she’d made. She might be a weirdo in Charming, but she belonged with her family. With Garrett and with Juice. Yeah, this life was under construction, and she didn’t understand all of it, but here she had love.

Hahn was disappointed, but her show wasn’t contingent on her moving. That was still on, scheduled for October, two months out. She’d have to make some trips to the city, but just short ones. Maybe she could figure out a way to have her family and her art. She’d try.

The bed moved as Juice knelt at her side. She felt the skin of his bare leg against hers. He’d taken his clothes off, too. Then she felt the cool soothe of the ointment on her back, and the light sting under the soothe as his fingers gently worked the ointment around the abused skin. She closed her eyes and relaxed into his loving touch.

He carefully massaged ointment into the entire tattoo. And then she felt his lips on her back, below the new ink. Then his tongue, moving languidly across her skin. He kissed and licked all over her lower back, up and down her sides, around each cheek, the tops of her thighs. He kissed down one leg and up the other. Then he gently lifted her arm and sucked each finger into his mouth, one at a time. He kissed her palm, the inside of her wrist, up her forearm, the crease of her elbow, up her to her shoulder. He worked his way down the other arm.

She was completely relaxed and entirely aroused all at once. She’d been moaning lightly the whole time. He had been quiet, his lips and tongue occupied with her skin. As he finished sucking her last finger, he pulled her legs apart and shifted to kneel between them. He put his hands around her hips and pulled up gently.

“Come up on your knees for me, baby.” She did, and he put both hands between her legs, all of his fingers sliding between her folds and along her cleft. She bucked and cried out. Then he moved up against her and slid his cock along the same track his fingers had been, rubbing the head on her clit.

She moaned. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her up. “Turn around—face me,” he whispered. She did as he asked, turning on one leg so that she could straddle his lap as he sat on his heels. He slid into her as he pulled her close, and then he made a quick turn and lay on his back. She laughed as he spun.

“There. Now your back won’t get hurt, and I have access to all the good stuff.”

“Pretty smooth. You’re like a sex hacker.”

“You know it, baby. Nothing I can’t get into.” He pressed the palm of his hand against her lower belly, his thumb on her clit, and she gasped and moaned. He chuckled. “Yeah, I know you like that.”

She started to move, loving how the pressure of his hand increased every time she came down on him and the way that moved something inside her. It was fucking incredible. She put her hands on her breasts and started to twist and tweak her nipples, pulling on the ring.

Juice groaned loudly. “Oh, God, you look so good. I love to see you touch yourself.”

She rode him hard, and he let her set the pace. She was getting really close, and then he moved his hand and grabbed her hips, holding her still on him. She whined and opened her eyes. “What? Why’d you stop me? I don’t want to stop.”

He was panting, his dark eyes on fire. He sat up and pulled her hands from her breasts. He put his hands around her face. “I’m close. I want to feel you in my arms when we come.”

She wrapped her arms around him, pressed tight to him, and she resumed her ride. He put his arms around her waist, well below her new ink. They came together, hard but quiet, their faces buried against the other’s shoulder.

OOO

Lilli and Opie got married a week or so later. Frank found a great red halter dress at the vintage shop on Crestview. If she had more boobs and ass, she might have looked like a femme fatale from a 40s detective movie, but she still thought she looked pretty good. She found some cool ankle strap platforms, too, trying to work the vintage angle. She’d never actually been to a wedding, so she didn’t know if it was appropriate or not, but that wasn’t generally a big concern of hers. Anyway, it was a biker wedding, so how “appropriate” could it be?

She’d dyed her hair strawberry blonde, having decided to try go natural without losing the pony that Juice loved. What the hell, might as well see what was going on under the freakazoid colors for once. That shtick was getting a little old, anyway. She wasn’t ready to let it all grow in, though. She loved that tat and would hate to cover it.

She'd chosen a halter dress with a almost no back intentionally. Juice was eager for the club to see the new ink. So was she. She'd done this thing. She was committed. She wanted everyone to know it. She'd just gotten past the gross flaking stage, and the crow looked pretty good.

It got a lot of attention, as did she and Juice. They didn't detract from Lilli and Opie, though—no one could have. Those two were so obviously crazy in love. Their wedding was amazing. Opie met Lilli in the aisle and carried her toward the altar, as though he just couldn't wait for her to get to him. It was like a fucking movie.

Frank had told Juice about the check from Martin Hahn and about the show. He was unreservedly happy for her, none of the weird fear he'd had at her school show—which, she guessed, had turned out to be not so weird after all. She'd starting working hard, selecting paintings she had and working on new ones.

She hadn't said anything to Juice about the job offer and the apartment. There wasn't any point. She'd turned that down. Telling him would only cause him unwarranted angst. She was here. She was his. He was hers. She was good with that. Really good. She was finally feeling calm with him.

She'd teased him about holding him to his claim that he'd have her name inked across his chest, but he'd asked her to design him a tat that would be his symbol for her. That idea she loved. She'd been working on it, trying things out. She wouldn't let him see it until she thought it was ready.

She was sitting with Tara and Gemma while the men were off doing whatever they did, a bunch of them, Jax and Juice included, sitting in a cluster near the back. Not Clay, though. Clay was sitting off by himself a lot. She noted it but didn't think much of it. She didn't understand most of the club stuff and didn't bother herself with it. Juice told her the important stuff, and so far he'd answered whatever questions she'd asked. The rest of it she felt okay not knowing.

Just then Juice came up behind her and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Dance with me." He took her hand, and they went up to dance together on the lakeshore.

He was a good dancer. A lot of these guys, she'd noticed, were inhibited by the badass biker thing, but Juice let himself move, and thus he was the one who wasn't making an ass out of himself. He was a great partner. And she loved being so close to him.

During a slow song, when they were wrapped up tight together, his hands on her bare back, he leaned back a little to look into her eyes. "You ever think about doing this some day?"

She knew what he was asking, but she smiled and said, "Dance in the moonlight by a lake? We're doing it. Gotta say, it's pretty cool. We should do it all the time."

He swung her around. "You know what I mean, baby. Do you think you might want to get married some day?"

She put her hands on the back of his head, her fingers in his mohawk. Okay, she'd be serious. "I don't know. I really don't think about it. You know I'm not good at thinking too far ahead. If I did, though, it would be you. Saying I don't know isn't about me not being sure about us. I am. I know that the crow is a big deal to you, and I mean everything that it means. I wouldn't have done it otherwise. But the ring is a big deal to me, and I don't think I'm ready for the big hoo-ha. All this"—she swept her arm across the vista of lights and flowers and bikers—"intimidates me. I like us the way we are. I'm still getting used to it, but I like it."

He kissed her. "I would ask you right now if you were ready. You say the word, and I will ask you. I'm ready when you are. Whenever you are. You're it for me, baby. Always."

She hugged him close. "Always."

## CHAPTER 25:

“Lucky,” Bif Naked

The prepay was going off. Juice opened his eyes and carefully slid his arm out from under Frank’s, trying not to disturb her as she slept, but trying to be quick enough that the phone didn’t wake her.

He rolled onto his back and grabbed the thing off the new nightstand. He answered without opening his eyes, just above a whisper. “Yeah, what?”

It was Chibs. “Juicy. Clay’s shot. He’s in surgery at St. Thomas.”

“Fuck! Okay. I’m on my way—or you need me to do anything?”

“Just get here. It’s touch and go, brutha.”

“I’m there in 15.” He closed the phone and rolled back to Frank. She was resting on his other arm, her fingers laced with his. He hated the thought of getting out of this sweet nest. Kissing her bare shoulder, he whispered, “Baby, baby, wake up.” She stirred and tucked herself tighter against him. His body responded immediately, and he pressed himself tight to her for a blissful moment, but then he closed his eyes and moved his hips back, out of contact with her warm, smooth ass.

He shook her gently. “Wake up, baby. I gotta go.” She opened her eyes and rolled into him. “Sorry, but I have to go.”

She blinked herself more fully awake and came up onto her elbows. “What’s wrong?” She looked over at the clock on the other nightstand. “It’s 1:30. Something’s wrong.”

“Clay was shot. I don’t know anything else, but he’s at St. Thomas, and we’re meeting there now.”

“Christ. Can I do anything?”

He smiled. *Good girl*. That was an old lady thing to say; she was learning fast. He let himself be distracted for a second and traced one finger over her collarbone and down to her breast, smiling as the skin around her nipple tightened. “No, baby. You go back to sleep, and I’ll let you know what’s up when I can, okay? Nothing for you to worry about right now. Your gun’s loaded, though, just in case, right?” She’d gotten much better with that little thing, and he felt better about leaving her alone at night because of it.

She rolled onto her stomach, scooted and stretched across the bed, reached under, and came up dangling the .38 by the trigger guard. “Right here. My albatross.”

Rolling his eyes, he pulled her back to him to kiss her forehead. “Just keep it close, okay? I love you, baby.”

She grabbed his arm as he started to get out of bed. She kissed him hard, her tongue in his mouth. When she was done, she sat back. "I love you. Be safe. Come home."

He nodded and tossed the blankets back. Smeagol crawled out from under them and gave him a dirty look.

OOO

*Jesus Christ.* Opie and Lilli's wedding had happened less than two weeks ago, and the Sons were suddenly falling apart. The Lobo cartel had tried to take Tara and had badly hurt her hand. Now Unser was saying that black guys—probably the Niners, then—had shot Clay in the T-M garage. And no one could find Bobby. Last anyone had heard, he was headed to visit Big Otto at the prison in Stockton.

Tig blamed himself for not being around to protect Clay. He was suddenly not wearing his Sergeant at Arms patch, so something must have gone down between them. Juice wondered if it had anything to do with the scratches he'd seen on Clay's face earlier, and the awful bruises and swelling on Gemma's. Looked pretty clear that Clay had beaten Gem, and Tig had always had a special affection for her. Tig tore off who knows where, muttering, "This is on me. This is on me."

What the fuck was happening to the Sons?

After an impromptu church meeting in the hospital chapel, Jax sent Juice back to T-M to check on the Prospects and keep track of the cops on the property. Once the cops left, Juice put Rat and Phil to cleanup in the garage, and he went inside, poured himself a whiskey, and sat at the bar, trying to sort out the events, trying to understand. This had been a seriously fucked up year for the Sons of Anarchy. They were making huge bank, but they were at each other's throats constantly, Sons blood was being spilled at an alarming rate, and the law was so far up their ass they could see daylight.

He got up and checked on the Prospects. They had the garage sparkling clean, no sign that their president had been lying bleeding on the floor hours earlier. "Okay, let's lock it up, guys."

As he was mounting his Dyna, the prepay went off. Jax. "Yeah, Jax. How's Clay?"

"Just out of surgery. I don't know. Listen, I need you in early tomorrow. I need to prep for the meet with Galen, and I'm gonna need some intel."

It was nearly dawn. "You want me just to stay?"

"Nah, bro. Go home, get a couple hours'. We all need it. Just be in 'bout 9 or so."

"Okay. I'll see you in a few. Sorry about Clay, Jax."

“Yeah.” The call ended.

OOO

It was still mostly dark when he got back home. The house was dark, too. Maybe Frank had been able to get back to sleep. Good. He came in as quietly as he could and went straight to the bedroom. He smiled—she’d turned on the bathroom light. She was sleeping, curled up into a tight little ball, as she usually was when he wasn’t in bed with her. He noticed a gleam on her nightstand—she’d left the gun there while she slept. She was coming to understand how this life worked.

He stripped and slid into bed as carefully as he could. He didn’t think he’d be able to sleep more, but he wanted to be with her. He pressed close, propping up on his elbow so he could watch her sleep. She looked young and vulnerable and lovely, her hair haloed on the pillow around her head.

He wasn’t sure why it had happened, but Frank had finally settled in—to the house, to the life, to him. He’d come back from the Arizona run, and she had that beautiful tat, and she was just *settled*. They hadn’t had a blowout since the night he’d brought up his issues with Desi. They still fought; Frank was a fighter, period. She came at disagreements hard and fast. But she wasn’t fighting *him* anymore.

He hadn’t realized how much time he’d spent trying to manage her life, or how little time he’d spent listening to what she was saying when she fought him. He had never seen her as a broken little girl, but he had devoted a lot of his love to making her better. Fattening her up when she’d lost so much weight and then trying to make sure she ate well (which was no small task—even when she wasn’t stressed out, she hardly ever thought about food). Taking care of her when Tig had gotten her drunk and she’d woken up in such a bad way. Delivering justice to Elster and his buddies.

He had a hard time seeing any of that as wrong. Even now, he couldn’t believe she really would have preferred it if he’d just gone, “Huh. Too bad. Good luck with that.” It all seemed like what you should do for someone you love. But he *had* let it color the way he loved her. That was true. He’d been smothering her. He’d stopped listening.

He was listening now, and he was trying to back off where he could. But he also knew that he would help her again. He would always help her, whether she wanted it or not. No way he would sit back while she suffered. He would take care of her. He couldn’t not.

He ran his fingers over her shoulder and down her back, tracing the outline of her new ink. God. When she’d dropped her shirt and shown him what she’d done, after what they’d been going through, knowing everything that it meant—it was the best gift she could ever give him. When he saw that crow, he finally, fully relaxed into the certainty that she was here, all in. With him. Truly. Put a lump in his throat every time he looked at it.

His caress roused her. She took a deep breath and shifted, rolling onto her back. “Hey. You’re home.” He smiled. Yeah. He really was.

She gave him a sleepy smile and put her hand on his face. “You in one piece?”

“Not a scratch. No danger of any kind tonight.” He put his hand over hers. “I love you.”

She slid her hand out from under his and moved it to his chest, tracing the outline of the new tattoo on his left pec. Two anarchy symbols entwined, one a replica from the SOA Reaper, the other, smaller, comprised of three paintbrushes. The circles overlapped so that they almost—but not quite, Frank thought that too on-the-nose and precious—formed a heart. Their initials were wound in as well. It was perfect. And he was pretty pleased not to have “Property of Frank” inked across his chest. He’d have done it, though.

She leaned up and kissed the ink. “You and me,” she murmured.

He rolled onto her, sliding his legs between hers and grabbing her knee to pull her leg around his waist. He felt her core against his erection, wet and ready for him. “Always, baby.”

## CHAPTER: 26

“To Wish Impossible Things,” The Cure

The bell over the front door chimed, and Frank got up off the floor, where she was shelving used games. She stood up to make her presence known. “Hi—let me know if you need anything!” she called out in her perkier retail voice.

“It’s just me, Frank.”

Weird for Marnie to be here at this time of day. She had a normal job, with a cubicle and reports and Powerpoint presentations, and probably a boss with a logo coffee mug and suspenders. “Hey, Marn. Garrett’s not here, you know. He’s at a vendor thing in the East Bay. He won’t be here until after 5.”

“I know. I’m here to see you.” Duh. Of course she’d know that. They lived together, stupid.

“Yeah, duh. What’s up?”

“Can we talk? I mean, if I tell you something, can you keep it to yourself? Completely—not Juice, and definitely not Garrett?”

It was late on a midweek morning, the deadest time of the day in the shop. They were alone. Frank pulled her behind the counter, and they sat down on the stools. “You have no idea how I feel about secret-keeping, Marnie. My lips are sealed. They could pull my fingernails out, I won’t tell anybody anything ever. What’s wrong?”

Marnie was dressed exactly like you’d expect someone who worked in a cubicle to be dressed: straight brown skirt, pink cotton blouse, thin white cardigan. Plain, low-heeled brown pumps. Geez, she even had her brown hair tucked back in a tortoiseshell headband. All she was missing was a prim strand of pearls. No wonder they got so many stares when the four of them went out anywhere. The librarians and the delinquents. Freaks and Geeks.

Marnie looked a little freaked herself at the moment. She sighed. “I don’t know if anything’s wrong, exactly. It’s just—.” She stopped. “Okay, look.” She stopped again. Then, “Screw it. I’m pregnant.”

“Holy fuck, Marnie! Are you sure? Did you do a test?” Frank had had a scare herself not so long ago, when her period was late, and she knew that she’d skipped a pill the day after her graduation party and then she and Juice had fucked like nymphomaniac bunnies. That minus sign was the best thing she’d seen in maybe ever. Turned out her period was just a smidge tardy. Phew.

“I’m dehydrated, I peed on so many sticks today. All giant pink pluses. I’m totally pregnant. And I have no clue what to do now.”

“And you came to *me* for advice? Because I so obviously have my shit together? Marnie, you need better friends.”

Marnie laughed. “No, I don’t. I’m coming to you because you have the Garrett strategy guide. Nobody knows him like you do. I know I’m asking a lot to ask you how to handle this with him after I’ve sworn you to secrecy, but you’re my best resource on your brother.”

A couple came into the shop just then and started browsing through the comics, so Frank dropped her voice. “If you want to take care of it and never say anything to Garrett, I’ll help you however you need. I totally get it. But there’s no reason to be worried about telling him, Marn. He’s going to support you no matter what. I mean, Gandhi would look at him and go, ‘Man, that dude is calm.’”

Marnie thought for a minute. “That’s the problem, ironically. I’m not afraid to tell him because I think he’ll be angry or try to make me do something I don’t want to do. I’m afraid because I think he won’t tell me what he really wants. He’ll support what I want. He’ll be noble and kind and do everything right. Seriously—you wouldn’t think that’d be annoying, but it sure can be. I want to know what *he* wants. It’ll help me figure out what to do. If I asked you to guess, would you?”

“Yeah, *that* would be typical Garrett—and yeah, it totally bugs. But no, I won’t guess. Mainly because I really have absolutely no idea if he thinks he’s ready to be a father. He’d be a great dad—like a *perfect* dad—but he kinda just got done with me. I don’t know. If it was just you—if, like, you didn’t know who the dad was—what would you want to do?”

“Frank, I don’t know. We just moved in together. I love him—my God, he’s amazing, even with all that blasted nobility. He says he loves me, and I believe him. But having a kid? That’s not something you just reboot if the relationship doesn’t work out.”

“But you didn’t answer my question, Marn. I asked what you’d do if there weren’t a dad in the picture. Do you want to be a mom? Seems like that should be the first question.”

“Yeah, I do. I want to pop at least couple, maybe three. And I’m 30, so the baby train is gathering steam to leave the station. I planned to do it the traditional way, though. Marriage, then kids later—you know, to save the marriage after we get all bitter and resentful. Your brother and I haven’t said one word about marriage. This is a shitty way to get that conversation started. Slightly less shitty than getting shot, which is how we took our last relationship step, but shitty nevertheless.”

“You keep not answering my question. No dad. What would you do?”

Without hesitation now, Marnie said, “I’d keep it. Him, I mean. Or her. Them. Whatever’s in there.”

“It doesn’t really matter what Garrett wants. It *is* your decision. Tell him that. Don’t worry about marriage or whether he wants to be a dad or doesn’t or any of that. Tell him to make his own decision, because you made yours. Then support his decision the way he’ll support yours. If he doesn’t want to be a dad, don’t make him be. Sperm donor and dad aren’t the same thing.”

“You’re telling me to choose between Garrett and a baby.”

“I don’t think so. I’m telling you to decide what you want and let Garrett decide what he wants.” Grinning, Frank continued, “Also, I need to point out again that my life is totally bizarre and I have no fucking idea what I’m talking about. So asking me for advice is just insane, and if you follow it and it blows up in your face, remember you were warned. But I do know my brother. Trust him.”

Marnie stood up. “Okay. I should get back. Thanks, Frank. You won’t say anything? Not to Juice, either?”

“Little tip, Marn: Never tell Juice a secret. He can’t keep one to save his fucking life. So no, I won’t tell him, either.”

OOO

Later that day, shortly after Garrett got to the shop, Frank was winding up to head home. Marnie came in, planning to hang out with her man and help out. Frank wondered if there was a serious and interesting conversation in the offing between them tonight. The shop was pretty busy at the moment, so maybe not the best time right now to give Garrett palpitations.

If he’d have palpitations. Frank was intensely curious about how he’d take the news; she really didn’t know. She wished she could be around for the big reveal, but that would probably be obnoxious. Okay, not probably. Definitely.

Garrett’s cell phone rang. Frank was standing right next to him behind the counter, so she took note. “Hey, man. What’s up?” He was quiet, his expression growing somber. “Yeah, okay. See ya.” He ended the call and turned to her, his head cocked oddly, just as her own phone chimed. It was Juice.

“Hey, you. Everything okay? You just called Garrett, didn’t you?”

His voice was ragged. “Baby, something’s going down here. I need you to stay with Garrett. Stay at the shop. Please don’t fight me, and please DO NOT be on your own anywhere. I’m serious. Stay put with your brother. Please. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, I will. What’s happening?”

His voice caught. “I’ll tell you when I see you. You have your albatross?”

“In my bag. Juice, are you okay? You’re scaring me.” He really was; he sounded desperate and haggard.

“I’m all right. I’m sorry, baby. Keep your bag close. Stay with Garrett, stay together. Stay at the shop. Lock up as soon as you can. Keep all the lights on, even after you lock up, okay? I love you, baby. I love you.” He disconnected.

OOO

Juice got there about three hours later. They’d closed up early and pulled the security gate, and now they were all sort of huddled in the back room, waiting and fretting. He had them freaked out. Garrett answered his knock at the back with a big steel bat—what they kept in the shop for defense—in his hand.

When she saw him, Frank ran into his arms, jumping up to wrap herself around him. “You’re okay, right? Are you okay?”

He just held her tight for awhile, his face buried in her shoulder. “I’m okay, baby. Thank you for staying here.” He looked at her. “I need to tell you what happened. Let’s sit down.”

He carried her to the couch, but Marnie was there. “Hey, Marnie.”

Marnie got up. “Hi, Juice. Garrett and I will just head up front if you need to talk.”

Juice looked at Marnie and then at Garrett. He nodded. “Thanks, guys. I want to talk to you, too. But I need some time with Frank first.” He pulled her loose and set her on her feet.

Then she got a good look at him. His kutte was a bloody mess. “Oh my God, Juice—are you bleeding? You’re not okay! What happened?!” She pulled at it, trying to check for wounds underneath.

He took her hands. “It’s not my blood.” He looked raw, like he’d been crying for hours.

“Sit, baby. Please.” She sat. He sat with her, and he took her hands in his again. He brought them to his lips and kissed them.

“Fuck, Juice. I’m freaking the fuck out. Whose blood is all over you?”

“It’s Lilli’s. She’s dead, baby.”

At first, Frank just sat there. He wasn’t making any sense. How could Lilli be dead? It had been months since she’d gotten hurt, and she was better now. She just got married.

“No, that’s crazy,” she whispered.

Juice was crying now, tears starting to fall down his cheeks. “It’s true. I was there.”

“Fuck you. That’s crazy.” She decided to tune out of this fucking stupid conversation, and she turned away from him.

He grabbed her face in his hands and turned her back. “Frank, look at me. She’s dead. People with a beef with the club hurt her—bad. I need you—and Garrett and Marnie, too—to come to the clubhouse with me. I need to keep you safe.”

She shoved his words into place in her head and dealt with them. The MC life was turning into something far more destructive and chaotic than she’d imagined. Tara hurt. Clay shot. Piney killed. And now Lilli. She felt tears churning—hysteria maybe—but fuck that. She muscled them down. “I don’t understand. Why would they hurt Lilli? Is it like what they tried to do to Tara?”

“No. This is different. One of their women was accidentally killed in a retaliation for Clay. So they went after our women. Payback. You have to come with me, Frank. We don’t know if they’ll stop at Lilli. Gemma and Tara and the kids are there already.

She nodded. “But why Garrett and Marnie? Why would they go after them?”

“I’m not taking any chances, baby. Marnie’s around me too much. Better be safe.”

“We have to tell them.” Then something occurred to her, something important. “I have to talk to Marnie right now. Go tell Garrett. Send Marnie back. I’ll tell her.”

Juice looked at her. “Are you okay, baby?”

She hit his chest with the side of her fist. “No. Fuck no. Lilli made all this bullshit make sense for me. She helped me. She helped *us*. But fuck tears. Just *fuck* ‘em.”

He kissed her. She held him tight and kissed him back.

“I love you, Frank. I’m so sorry.” He got up and went out to the front. A minute or so later, Marnie came back.

“Frank, what’s going on? Is Juice okay? Shit, are you okay? You look terrible.”

She told Marnie what Juice had told her and what they needed to do now. Then she said, “I’m so sorry you’re getting pulled into this, Marnie. God, I’m so fucking sorry. People I love keep getting fucked up because I love Juice. But you have to tell Garrett. And Juice. Now. Before we leave here. They need to know you have a baby on board. I don’t know what all this is, but it’s some fucked up shit. If you think you want to keep it, they need to know who they’re protecting.”

“My God. Frank, this is fucking nuts. This is your life? What the hell is Juice thinking? You’re too damn young for a life like this!”

“Marn, shut up. I love Juice. I’m with him. This is what his life is. So now it’s mine, too. I’ll send Garrett back—I assume you want to tell him alone. Do you want to tell Juice, or do you want me to do it?”

Marnie just sat there, stunned. “I can’t even think. I haven’t figured out how to tell him yet.”

“I suggest just laying it out there, like you told me. Doesn’t seem like we have all that much time. What do you want me to do about Juice?”

Marnie laughed bitterly. “Tell him, I guess. Hell, maybe we can have a combination baby shower and funeral. Little black party favors—maybe little knives and guns. So sweet.”

Frank felt that like a slap, like Lilli had just gotten slammed. “Wow, Marn. That was harsh even for you.”

“Sorry. Today has been a very strange day. Having a hard time understanding what the hell just happened to my nice little boring life.”

“I’ll send Garrett back.”

She went out and told Garrett that Marnie needed him. They had a weird kind of dance going on, partners shifting back and forth. She was back with Juice, now on the sales floor, behind the counter. All the lights were on, even though they’d closed a couple of hours earlier. Per Juice’s order.

He took her in his arms. “Marnie okay?”

“She’s had a rough day. She’s getting shipped off to lockdown at a biker compound so she doesn’t get killed, and she’s back there right now telling Garry she’s pregnant. This was not how she planned to break the news.”

“Jesus. She’s pregnant?”

“I told her you needed to know, while you’re protecting her from whatever we’re being protected from.”

“That was the right call. You’re becoming a great old lady.” He held her at arms’ length and looked her over. “You seem better than I thought you’d be, baby.”

If he could see inside her head, he probably wouldn’t say that. “I am so sad and angry I feel like my head is going to collapse in on itself from the pressure. But I am fucking sick of falling apart. I liked me much better when I didn’t cry. So fuck tears. I want blood. You guys will be making the motherfuckers who hurt her very bloody, right? That’s what you do, right? Retaliation, or whatever you fucking call it?”

“We’re working that out.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“Frank, it’s club business. Leave it be.”

She started to fight, but then she remembered what Lilli had told her: *if you're told you can't know, best to drop it*. She closed her mouth, honoring Lilli's advice. Instead, she shoved him hard and walked away from him toward the back room. Time to check in on Marnie and Garrett.

OOO

The last time Frank had been at a double funeral, she and Garrett had been burying their parents. Now she sat next to Juice as Opie buried his father's ashes and his new wife's body, both of them killed by club violence. He and Lilli hadn't even been married a month before she was killed. Juice had told her that Opie's first wife had died violently, too, because of the club. Frank didn't know how he could deal. Maybe he couldn't. He sat there, rigid, acknowledging no one around him. Her heart broke for him. Tara and Jax sat on either side of him. Jax was Opie's best friend; Tara had been Lilli's. Tara held Opie's hand, slack in his lap, throughout the service.

She'd never seen so many bikers in one place before. She thought there had been a lot at Opie and Lilli's wedding, but the procession of Harleys into the cemetery had seemed miles long, and now the grounds were a sea of black leather. Opie's dad, Piney, had been a founding member of the Sons of Anarchy, one of the "First 9." He and Jax's dad had been *the* founders of the club, in fact. So just about every Son from every charter in the country, even some from the charter in Belfast, Ireland, were here to bury a brother, and to support another as he buried his father and bride. It was beautiful, really, and it gave Frank some insight into the brotherhood, into why the holy *fuck* a man would be committed to this crazy, dangerous life.

As the burial service ended, Juice stepped a few feet away from her to talk with Chibs and Happy. Frank stood and watched Opie, standing stoically with Tara, Jax, and the minister who'd performed the service. It looked like Jax and Tara were the ones handling things. Opie was—well, he just was. Frank's heart reached out to him.

As Frank stood by herself in the grass, starting to really miss Juice even though he was only 10 feet away, Gemma came up and put her arm around her shoulders. "How you holding up, baby?"

"Hi, Gemma. I'm okay. Sad for Ope."

The club matriarch looked over at her surrogate son. "Yeah. He's had a real bad run." She turned back to Frank and squeezed her shoulders. "You know, it's not like this all the time, sweetheart, this life of ours. Things are a good most of the time. I want you to know that. And no matter what, we're a family. We take care of each other. Okay?"

Frank nodded. "Okay."

Gemma took gripped Frank's chin and kissed her on the lips. "Okay. Good girl. It's time to head to the clubhouse. Why don't you grab your old man and get him moving that direction. I'll see you over there." She walked off.

Despite Gemma's pep talk, fears about all the death and pain and suffering that was happening because of the Sons kept pushing in at the corners of her head. She shoved them back out, locked them up in the same dark place she kept her tears. There was nothing good where they were. This was Juice's life, so it was hers. She'd signed on, inked it into her skin. She was all in. Deal with whatever.

Her chief concern was Garrett and Marnie. The danger she was prepared to deal with kept turning its sights to them, and they hadn't signed on for shit. Now they were going to be parents—Garrett was thrilled with the news and had proposed on the spot, even in the midst of the turmoil of the night. She needed to figure out how to keep them out of the insanity. So far, she had no idea.

There was a wake at the clubhouse after the burial. Opie sat on a chair and stared. She wasn't sure he was even entirely aware of where he was. People walked up to him, a long line of people; men patted him on the back or put their hands on his shoulder, women kissed his cheek. They said a few words, probably canned platitudes of empty solace. But he didn't move or respond in any way.

She had a pretty decent idea where his head was.

Juice held fast to her. He wouldn't let her out of his sight, and she was glad for it. His touch kept her centered. After a couple of hours, Juice leaned in and whispered in her ear, "You ready to go, baby?"

"Yeah, I am."

He kissed her cheek. "Let's pay our respects to Ope and get out of here."

He started to rise, but she held him back. "No. He doesn't want it. He doesn't. All these people coming up to him, they're doing it for themselves, because they don't know what else to do and they think they have to do something. Trust me, it doesn't help for a whole bunch of assholes to say lame things like 'I'm sorry for your loss,' or worse, to tell you how special the person you just lost and will never be with again was. Wakes suck. They *suck*. They suck so fucking hard. They're for the lame assholes who don't know what else to do, so they can say they were supportive. It's the worst fucking thing you could do to someone who just lost someone they love, a parent or a wife—or fuck, both. Please, let's leave him alone and just go."

She was crying. Fuck, fuck, fuck. She thought she'd locked that motherfucking door.

Juice pulled her head to his and held her. Then he pressed his lips to her forehead. "Okay, baby. Let's go home."

## CHAPTER 27:

“Devil’s Right Hand,” Johnny Cash

*Are you kidding me with this shit?*

Juice lay his head back on the couch and let the whiskey swirl around his brain. He was trying very hard to get very drunk, because he just couldn’t think about this shit anymore. Clay was back, but Jax had the gavel. Clay had laid it on the club that *he’d* fucking killed Opie’s dad, and that *Opie* had shot him for it. Clay and Gemma were split, and Gem had taken up with some pimp. Now Juice was babysitting Clay and his new oxygen tank, and somehow it was Juice’s fault that Gemma had torn up the pimp’s brothel and gotten herself arrested.

Jax, Tig, Chibs, and Ope were all in jail because Tig had killed that Pope girl trying to retaliate for Clay, and Jax and Chibs helped him get away, guns blazing. Then Ope got himself caught up on purpose, to protect them. They were still badly exposed and at serious risk, now all four of them.

What. The. Fuck.

At least Bobby was back, after being held for weeks in the county jail. Juice sat forward and took another long swig from the bottle of Jack. He was going to have to get up and get another; this one was just about done, just dregs and spit sloshing in the bottom of the bottle. He put his head back and closed his eyes.

Sometime later, he felt weight on his lap. Aw, man. Fucking Crow Eater gonna get him in trouble at home now, too. He lifted his head and opened his eyes. The room swam, out of focus. He blinked, and Frank’s glasses came into view, then Frank, straddling his lap.

“Hey, you. Bobby says you need some help, ya big lush.”

Juice shook his head—whoa, spinning—and looked over at the bar. Bobby nodded and raised his glass.

“Nah, baby. I’m good. Jus’ chillin’.” His tongue felt big.

She put her hands on his cheeks. They felt cool and wet. She kissed the end of his nose. “You are *such* a crybaby. Why don’t you come home with me? You can chill there.”

He wrapped her up in his arms and pressed his face between her sweet tits. Ah, that felt good. “Why don’ you jus’ stay here wi’ me?” He slid his hand down the back of her jeans, hooking his finger through the center strap of her thong.

She grabbed his hand and pulled it back out. “Uh, no. I am *so* not going to fuck you in front of Bobby. You can’t even get it up anyway—I can tell, you know. I’m sitting right here, and that always makes you hard. But you have yourself a textbook case of whiskey dick. Come on, doofus, I’m taking you home.”

He grinned. She called him doofus! He missed that. “You called me doofussss. I like it.”

“Yeah? Well, I got a whole list of names you’re gonna love, then. Come on, Bobby’s gonna help you.”

He felt Bobby yank him up. “Come on, shithead, let’s get you to that piece of yellow crap outside.”

“Shhhh, Bob. Careful. She loves that piece a y’low crap. She’s mean if you piss her off.”

Bobby laughed. “I think I can take her—hey, ow!” Juice looked over, tried to see what he missed. All he saw was a blurry Frank, eyebrows up.

OOO

He woke up lying on his stomach on the sofa, an arm and a leg dangling off the edge. He’d been drooling, apparently for quite some time. He opened his eyes and tried to get oriented. The room was mostly dark, just a small halo of light coming from the lamp behind the corner of the sofa, where Frank was curled up, reading, twirling her strawberry blonde ponytail in her fingers. She’d kept that color for weeks now. If her natural hair color was like that, he hoped she go natural and stick with it. It was gorgeous.

But damn, that light was bright.

He groaned, and she looked up. “Hey, you. How you feeling?”

He tried to sit up, but gave it up as a bad job. He managed to wipe his mouth, though. “Like you hit me with a cinderblock. Did you hit me with a cinderblock?”

She laughed. “No, but your frenemy Jack Daniels did. Can I get you something? Water, aspirin, food? We have a lovely wastebasket if you need to ralph. I brought it in and put it next to you. It’s been beta tested.”

“I just need to lie here for a little while, I think.”

She came and sat down on the floor by his head. “Sorry you’re on the sofa like this. I couldn’t get you down the hall.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m a little worried about you. You don’t usually get so fucked up. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

“Thanks, baby. Not right now, though. Right now I just want to lie still and be quiet.”

“Okay, I’m right here if you need anything.” She went back to her book.

OOO

Happy, Bobby, Phil, Juice, and the three new transfers—GoGo, Pegs, and Frankie Diamonds—were all gathered, with Tara and Gemma, to meet the guys getting released. Everybody but Clay. Juice wasn't sure how they'd gotten clear of the charges, but they had. Juice wasn't clear on much about the club these days.

Rat pulled the van into the lot, and Jax, Chibs, and Tig got out. Ope wasn't with them.

OOO

Frank's show was coming up soon, and she was in San Francisco, meeting with Martin Hahn to work out details and make final selections of the pieces to show. She'd be back the next day, in time for Ope's funeral.

She'd been making occasional trips back and forth to San Francisco since her show had been scheduled, and they made Juice uncomfortable, this one especially. She was in distress over Lilli's death, and now Opie's, all the violence that was just fucking raging around the club. He didn't like her on her own, so far away from him. He hadn't shared his worry with her, lest she accuse him again of being a nanny. He just stewed on his own and counted the hours until she got back.

He also hated the idea that she was putting a lot of miles on that stupid heap she insisted on driving. It was in good shape, he supposed, for a 36-year-old car, but it was a *36-year-old car*. And not a classic, not a muscle car with some teeth. A fucking AMC Gremlin. Those were crap when they came off the line. He wanted to buy her a new car, a cage she'd be safe in, but he had set the idea aside. If she wanted one, she'd say something. He wasn't about to take Elwood away from her now. Occasionally, Juice got out of his own way and learned a lesson.

He had some downtime that night, which wasn't great when she was away. Just more time to stew. He was playing Call of Duty, trying to keep himself distracted. The doorbell rang, and Juice grabbed his gun and checked the peephole. Garrett was standing on the porch, his hands shoved into his jeans pockets. Juice set his gun out of sight on top of a bookcase and answered the door. "Hey, man. What's up?"

"Hey, Juice. Can we talk?"

"Sure—come on in. Get you a beer?"

"That'd be good, yeah."

Juice pulled a couple beers from the fridge and uncapped them. They sat at the kitchen table. "How's Marnie doing?"

"Okay, good." He laughed. "Puking. But already turning my old room into a nursery. It's weird to see that old house looking so different."

“I can’t believe you’re going to be a dad, man.”

Garrett smiled. “I don’t know. Feels pretty natural to me. But that’s not really why I’m here. Or maybe it is, in a way. I want to talk to you about something. About Frank.”

Juice felt a little adrenaline spike. When Garrett got between him and Frank, it was something big. “Okay, shoot.”

“You know I love you, right? You’re my best friend. You know I understand how much you love my sister, right? I mean, I’ve been in your corner the whole time.”

Bigger adrenaline spike. “Garrett, what? Yeah, I know all that. What?”

His friend looked down at his beer bottle, fraying the label nervously. Oh, shit. “Juice, man. This life you’re in. This life you’ve put her in—it’s fucking nuts. People are dying all around her. They’re dying bloody, man. All around her. Not just Sons. Their families, too. It was one thing when I thought you were just an outlaw. But this is so much bigger, so much *worse* than anything I imagined. I am terrified for her every single day now. She’s so young. The thought that she could be shot, or beaten, or kidnapped just because she loves you? I can’t be okay with that. How can *you* be okay with that? If you really love her? How can you let her live in such risk?”

Bolus of adrenaline. Juice was struggling mightily to keep a lid on his temper. He spoke through clenched teeth. “I am doing everything in my power to keep her safe, Garrett. You know I really love her. You know it. It would kill me if something happened to her. My life isn’t always like it is now. It will calm down. It has to. Then I’ll be ‘just an outlaw,’ as you say.”

Garrett met his eyes. There was steel in his pale stare. “And if she gets hurt before then? How does that help her? She’s more than just my little sister, Juice. I helped *raise* her. I asked you to keep her safe. She’s had enough pain. You know she has.”

Rage was churning through Juice’s blood now. He wanted to knock Garrett’s teeth out. This was not his fucking decision to make. Leaning forward, he spat out. “What do you want me to do, Garrett? Dump her? Throw her out? You don’t think that would cause her pain? Because we’ve worked fucking hard to get where we are, and I know she wants to be here. Her eyes are wide open, and she’s still here. Breaking trust with her now—how much hurt, how much *damage*, do you think *that* would cause her?”

In the face of Juice’s anger, Garrett pushed his chair back from the table. “I’m sorry for saying this, Juice. But it needs to be said. I can’t sit and watch this happen without trying to inject some sanity here. There’s something else. What do you know about Martin Hahn’s offer?”

That was a curveball. What did that have to do with anything? “What? For the show? That’s where she is now, working on it—which you know. It’s in the middle of October, which you also know.”

“I know more than that. Do you?”

Yeah, he knew he was going to be beating the bloody shit out of his friend tonight. He jumped up from his chair and stalked to the counter, putting some distance between them. “What the fuck are you talking about? She sold a painting, she’s getting a show. What else is there?” He was shouting. Garrett was lucky that was all he was doing. So far.

“Hahn offered her a job at his gallery. And an apartment, free of charge. The chance to live and work as an artist in San Francisco. All her dreams, laid out on a damn doily for her. She turned him down. To be with you.”

His rage ran out of him as if through an open spigot. He slumped against the counter. “What? Are you serious?”

“Do you think I’d be joking right now?”

“She didn’t say anything to me.” Not one word. Not any indication. Nothing. Just happy, fully committed Frank, suddenly settled. And a huge crow inked on her back.

“Of course she didn’t. Why would she? So you could know how close you came to losing her? That’s not her style.”

“Jesus. *Jesus*. But—what does it have to do with anything now? She turned it down.”

“It wasn’t like he had an opening to fill and he offered it to her. He wants to work with her, so he made a job. The person who bought her painting wants to be her patron, so she offered her an apartment. If she changed her mind, they would probably still be there for her.”

He leaned forward. “Juice, she still has a chance to get free of this. To be safe. But she is committed to you now. She won’t ever waver from that. She will die with you. Unless you set her free.”

OOO

Opie’s funeral was really hard. He’d been killed protecting Jax. A warrior, a brother to the end. He’d ridden a hard road, full of pain and loss. Juice told himself that Ope deserved to rest. Maybe he was with the people he’d loved and lost.

If there was a place in heaven for a Son.

Opie didn’t really have any particular loved one anymore. His kids’ grandmother didn’t bring them up for the funeral. His wife and father were already dead. His mother didn’t come. The Sons were his loved ones. They all grieved together.

Frank was subdued all day, saying little. She stayed in the background. When they got home, she kissed his cheek and went straight to her studio and closed the door.

Juice went to the kitchen and pulled a beer out of the fridge. He sat at the table in the dark and thought. He thought about the Sons. He thought about Frank. How deeply he loved her. How much she meant. He thought about what Garrett had said. He hadn't told her that he knew about the offer in the city. They were solid, finally. At last. Things between them were perfect. He couldn't lose that. He couldn't.

He could keep her safe. He could. He would.

## CHAPTER 28:

“Beyond Love,” The The

So many Sons had died in the months that she and Juice had been together: Kozik. Piney. Opie. Miles, too, but she didn't want to think too much about that. Lilli had been killed. Tara had been badly hurt. Garrett had been shot.

How long before Juice was really hurt, or worse? She stood at her easel and tried to get her head straight. She was so scared. She'd committed herself to this man. Now that she had, she needed to keep him. Since she'd put the crow on her back, she'd found the way she fit here—or she'd made a way to fit. Either way, this was the life she wanted, here in this house, with this man. She just wanted all the chaos outside the walls to stay out of her fucking way.

She was painting on autopilot, applying streaks of ochre thoughtlessly over a half-finished canvas on which shades of violet dominated. She should probably get out of this black dress. Seemed like she should keep paint off of it—seemed like she'd need it pretty often.

Just not for Juice. Please, not for Juice.

He knocked lightly on the door. “Baby? Can I come in?” He never had broken his promise to stay out of her studio unless invited.

“Yeah, come on.”

He opened the door and came in. Smeagol meowed and jumped off the futon to wind around his legs. He picked him up and gave him a little hug. “Hi, tubbo.” He put the cat down and walked up behind her, his arms around her waist, his head on hers. She felt herself relax at his touch. “I'm worried about you, baby. You've been so quiet all day.”

She kept painting as he held her. “Not much to say, I guess. I'm just sad. Scared. My brain can't keep up with all this.”

“I know. I'm so sorry. I'll keep you safe. I will.”

She leaned her head back onto his chest. “Who'll keep *you* safe?” she whispered. “I can't lose you.”

He tightened arms around her and almost lifted her off her feet. “Oh, baby. You won't. You won't. It's you and me. Always.”

“You don't know that. You can't.” This feeling of her life and happiness being so tied to another person made her heart dizzy. She wondered if she hadn't been better off on her own, before she knew what it felt like to love like this. She turned around in his arms and held him close, her paintbrush still in her hand. “I *love* you. It scares me so much. Don't you fucking go anywhere.”

He put his hands around her face. “I won’t. I’m here. I love you.” He lifted her glasses off her face and tossed them on the futon. He kissed her. She thrust her tongue into his mouth immediately and climbed up on him, letting the paintbrush drop to the floor.

He walked them to the wall and pressed her against it, their kiss frantic and deep. She moved her stud all over his tongue until he was moaning into her mouth. She pulled back and bit his lower lip, hard, drawing a little blood. He flinched and looked at her. She leaned in and licked the blood off his lip. She didn’t know why, but she felt a different kind of impulse right now. She was throbbing with need for him, but she was also fighting back an urge to hit him, to bite him, and for him to do the same. She’d never felt this before.

She clutched his face in her hands and bit him again. This time, he knocked her hands away and pushed her hard back against the wall, panting. He kept her pinned, staring at her. She flexed against the hard mound in his jeans and moaned. She struggled against his hand pinning one shoulder, knocking it away. She brought her hand up under his shirt and grabbed his nipple, twisting it hard.

“Ah! Fuck, baby!” He yanked her hand away and leaned his whole body into her, grabbing her hands and holding them extended out to the sides. They stared at each other, both panting, a question hanging in the air between them.

She was so unbelievably turned on. She needed him hard. She didn’t know why. It scared her. But she needed him to come at her. “Please,” she whispered.

Still he just stared at her, his dark brown eyes burning. “I don’t want to hurt you, Frank.”

Right now, she didn’t care. Maybe she’d care later. She didn’t know. But she didn’t care now. “Please,” she whispered again.

Without breaking eye contact, he reached between them and grabbed at the neckline of her dress. He yanked down hard, ripping the lacy fabric down the middle, exposing her bare chest. He lifted her up the wall several inches, bringing her breasts to his face. He sucked her pierced nipple into his mouth, hard. Really hard. It hurt. In the way she needed. She screamed and thrust against his chest as he suckled her, clutching at him with her legs. He released that breast and moved to the other, holding her up with his hands under her arms. That breast he took into his mouth and bit. And she came, screaming, just like that, her hips flailing as she throbbed, her orgasm intense but somehow unsubstantial without any pressure inside her or on her clit. She needed more. He brought her back down, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, pressing herself hard to him. She put her mouth to his neck and sucked and bit and licked. She felt wild.

“Jesus, baby. What’s gotten into you?” She didn’t answer. She just clung to him.

He pulled her loose and set her on her feet to pull the remains of her dress off. When she was wearing nothing but a thong and black platform peep-toe pumps, he snagged his fingers through the thin bands across her hips and snapped the thong off her. She started to kick off her shoes,

but he pushed her against the wall. “No. Leave those. If we’re gonna do this, you need the height.” Then he open his jeans and pulled himself free.

He picked her up by the waist and spun her around, pushing her face-first against the wall. He knocked her legs apart and, without more warning, rammed himself into her, as deep as he could get. She started to arch back against him, but he shoved her to the wall, holding her hard there, her breasts mashed against the rough finish, the ring in her nipple catching slightly over and over as his thrusts moved her body. He slammed into her, grunting, making her cry out, his fingers digging into her hip and shoulder until she knew he’d leave marks. She was so wet she could feel it dripping down her legs.

His grunts were getting louder, strained. He leaned against her as he pounded, his mouth on her shoulder. The hand that was on her hip moved around to the front and worked her clit vigorously. She screamed again and bucked against his thrusts, coming so hard she thought she would die. He bit down on her shoulder and groaned, and then his head reared back and he yelled “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” His legs gave out and he pulled them both down into a wet, heaving heap on the floor.

The lay tangled together, not speaking, until their breathing was back to normal. Juice sat up then and pulled her close, brushing hair out of her face. He looked down at her with worry. “Baby, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Well, that depended on what he meant. She had a whole array of sore places. She put a hand on his cheek. “I’m okay. Are you?”

“Yeah, I guess. What was that all about?” He took her hand and kissed it.

She sat up and curled over her knees, feeling shy now. “I don’t know. I just needed it like that. It was intense. Are you okay with it?”

His hand grazed the shoulder he’d bitten. It stung; she expected she’d find an open bite mark there, when she looked. “I don’t know. I mean, in some ways it was awesome. It was totally intense. I can’t remember the last time I came that hard. But I’m sitting here looking at the places you’re bruised now or, God, bleeding. I’m not okay with that at all. I hurt you. I hate that.”

“But I wanted it.” She whispered it; she was starting to feel pretty embarrassed. She didn’t understand what had happened to her.

“Why, baby?”

“I don’t know. I was feeling buzzy all day, though, like an electric current just constantly through me, and I don’t now. I feel calm. I’m glad for that.” She did feel calm. The fear and grief and whatever else bad she felt had receded a lot, assuaged somehow by the, okay, kinda scary sex they’d just had.

He leaned in to kiss her, and she saw that his lower lip was swelling. She kissed it lightly. “Sorry about that.”

He laughed and touched his tongue to the sore spot. “It definitely got my attention. I guess we’re both a little banged up now. But I’m glad you’re feeling better, baby.” He framed her face with his hands. “We’re going to be okay, you and me. We’re going to get old and fat together. Okay?”

She put her hands on his arms. “Okay.”

## CHAPTER 29:

“Help Me I Am in Hell,” Nine Inch Nails

The chaos around the Sons continued, but the clubhouse was subdued, reeling from recent events. Juice was spending a lot of time with Clay, babysitting him as he continued to recover from the shooting. He seemed to be a completely different man—broken. He’d lost the gavel; he’d lost his old lady. He might even lose the club. Juice felt sorry for him. It was hard to witness the downfall of the President who’d patched him in.

What time he wasn’t spending with Clay, he was spending with Frank when he could. Her show was coming up fast, though, and she had thrown herself into getting ready for it. She was closed in her studio a lot. She and Garrett had hired their friend Brian officially to work full-time at the shop, since Frank’s attention was so much on her art right now. The shop was rolling well, and Garrett was even considering adding another employee or two, so that he could spend more time with Marnie.

Garrett hadn’t said anything more about San Francisco, apparently not to either of them. Even when it was clear that Juice hadn’t told Frank he knew, he let it be, as if giving Juice the information was as far as he felt his responsibility went. That Juice had no intention of acting on that information didn’t seem to be affecting how Garrett felt about his friend. And Juice had no intention whatsoever. Frank was with him. She trusted him. Things between them were so close and unbelievably good. She was stressed, but she was leaning on him for comfort. He was going to keep her close and take care of her. End of fucking story.

Juice stayed with Frank and away from the clubhouse as much as he could, but he was the intelligence officer, and he had work to do. On this day, though, he was there working on a side project. Lilli had been quite well off, financially—worth almost two million. She had never lived wealthy, though, and Ope had long ago asked him not to reveal her net worth to the club, because he didn’t want Clay to think the club should have access to Lilli’s money.

That was a secret Juice had kept. Lilli had no family but the Sons, but Ope had his kids, estranged or not. It fell to Juice to deal with what Ope and Lilli had left. Lilli had left everything to Ope, of course, but he hadn’t had time or inclination to make any arrangements in the short time between Lilli’s death and his own. In addition to selling their house and belongings, Juice was arranging for all financial assets to be transferred to a trust for Ellie and Kenny Winston. He was making Tara the executor. Tara was the only one he trusted with Lilli’s money. She’d agreed as soon as he’d asked.

He was in the office, getting the details finalized, when Jax walked in with a small manila envelope. Juice changed windows with a quick keystroke as Jax came in.

“Bro, this came today. I need you to check it out. I have no idea who sent it or what it is. Could be malicious—probably is.” He handed Juice the envelope.

It was addressed, in crappy handwriting, all caps, to JAX TELLER, PRESIDENT, SOA. Juice tented the envelope and dropped out a flash drive. “Yeah, I’ve got a laptop I use just for suspect downloads. I’ll check it out now.”

“Thanks, bro. I’ll be in the chapel.” He walked out.

Juice opened the beater laptop and inserted the flash into a USB port. He double-clicked the icon.

What came up was a video. Grainy, but clear enough. Too clear. Several black men—one, two, three, four of them, all in purple shirts, the Niner color—standing in the frame. And Lilli, on the concrete floor, naked, her hands bound in front. Juice was paralyzed. One of the men leaned down and grabbed her hair. She spit in his face, and got his boot in her gut. Another man turned and put his face right in the camera. Laroy, the Niner boss, his face bloody, his eye badly swollen. “This is for the Sons. Kill my Veronica? Want y’all to see what we do for payback. Y’all like porn, right? Maybe you been missing your Cara Cara bitches. Well . . .” He held a vicious looking knife up to the lens. “Hope you dig the kinky stuff—little blood play, you know. She’s a fighter—everybody here’s looking forward to an extra piece.” Then they dragged Lilli, fighting and kicking, doing real damage every chance but bound and outnumbered, and threw her, face down, onto a battered, stained pool table.

Juice looked at the timer on the video. 7 hours, 32 minutes, 18 seconds. He slammed the laptop shut and shoved his chair back from the desk. He sat there, stunned, and then he dropped to his knees and heaved into the trashcan.

In that moment, he was so glad Opie was dead. He would never know what Lilli had endured. What had happened to her had been written all over her body when the Niners hung her on the T-M gate, but this—this was too much.

When Juice had composed himself and cleaned up, he went to Jax.

The new President was sitting at the table, reading the most recent RIRA intel that Juice had gathered. Juice knocked on the open door. Jax looked up.

“Yeah, bro. You check it out?”

Juice tried to talk, but he couldn’t get sound out. He coughed and tried again. “Yeah. Jax, it’s—” He didn’t know how he could say it.

“Come on, Juice. What?”

He forced it out. “It’s Lilli. They recorded what they did to her. Jax, the vid is more than seven hours long.”

Jax sat back, his face gone grey. “Jesus Christ.” He dragged his hand from his brow over his pointed beard. “Jesus Christ.” He sat in shock for several seconds. Then, “We have to know what’s on that whole file, Juice. There could be something—we have to know.”

Fuck, no. There was no way Juice could deal with that. No way. “Jax, man. No, I can’t. I can’t watch it. Not that. No. I’m sorry.”

Jax looked at him, thinking. Juice stood pat. Then Jax nodded, saying, “Yeah, okay,” and stood up. He walked to Juice, put his arm around his shoulders, and led him into the main room. Tig, Bobby, and Phil were sitting at the bar. Jax walked up to Tig and put his hand on the back of the older man’s neck.

What happened to Lilli, and then to Opie, landed hard on Tig. He’d gone rogue and killed Veronica Pope in an attempt to kill Laroy as retaliation for Clay’s shooting. In the fallout of that mistake, made on a hit not sanctioned by the club, Lilli and Opie were dead. So was Tig’s own daughter.

And the Niners hadn’t even shot Clay. Opie had. Because Clay had killed Piney.

Jesus.

Now Jax leaned in, his hand tight on Tig’s neck, and said, low and with menace, “You’re going to go back to the office and watch a very long video. Juice will get it set up for you. You’re going to sit there and watch the whole thing, and you’re going to tell me if there’s anything important, anything we need to know, on that file. And if your dick moves at all—if it even twitches, you sick fuck, I will turn you into a eunuch. I will be checking in. Do you understand?”

Tig nodded. “Yeah, man. Okay.”

Juice set him up and got the fuck out of there. He couldn’t watch even a second of it again.

While he was setting up, Jax must have filled Bobby and Phil in on what was going on. The gloom in the clubhouse was thick all day. Nobody left. It felt disrespectful to Lilli to leave while the video was playing. When Chibs came in, Jax told him what was up. They all sat at the bar, drinking quietly. They’d all loved Lilli, really loved her. Juice thought Bobby and Tig had both been a little in love with her, maybe Chibs, too, though they’d never let on that they crushed on a brother’s old lady. They all took her death hard. They were taking this just as hard.

Jax did check in several times, never staying long. Tig’s sexual proclivities were way over the top, and Juice thought Jax was deadly serious about what he’d do to Tig if he got turned on by what happened to Lilli. Every time Jax came back out from the office, though, he looked like he’d aged another year.

Nobody talked. Juice called Frank and told her he’d be late. Jax did the same with Tara. Otherwise, it was silent. Then, in the evening, Tig came out. He was pale and sweaty, his eyes swollen and rimmed with red. No, he hadn’t been turned on. Bobby poured him a shot of tequila. Tig tossed it back and gestured impatiently for another. Bobby poured it; Tig tossed it back. Then he knocked the shot glass aside and just grabbed the bottle of Patrón.

Jax looked at him expectantly. Tig coughed. “I got ‘em etched into my fucking head, but I think Pope’s already killed three of ‘em, including Laroy. The other is the new Niner boss. Nothing else in the video that could help us.” He fought back tears. Damon Pope, Veronica’s father and the most dangerous man any of them had ever known, had burned Tig’s daughter alive, making Tig watch, in his own retaliation.

“Jax, man. She never screamed. Not once. She bloodied every one of them, and they were pissed. The things they did to her—she never screamed. They tried to make her, but she wouldn’t. She fought until she was unconscious, and she fought when she woke up until she was unconscious again, and when she was too hurt to fight anymore she just laid there, and she never fucking screamed once. Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

Chibs threw a bottle across the club, and it crashed against the wall in a spray of glass and whiskey. Jax squeezed off the tears in his eyes and stood up. “Get me that flash drive, Juice. I have to go see Pope.”

OOO

Juice had spent the whole of that dark day thinking. When he pulled up, late, to the house, he stopped and idled on the street for a couple of minutes. Frank, having grown used to living in a single room, got freaked out by the dark corners of the bigger house at night and liked all the lights on, especially when she was alone. The windows were ablaze. The living room drapes—they had drapes now, because she’d made them—and blinds were open. That wasn’t safe, and he’d have to remind her how exposed she was like that. But for right now, he enjoyed the view of his home. He could see one of her paintings on the wall. Then she walked in with a bottle of water in her hands and sat down on the sofa.

That was his old lady. That was his house. This was his life. He loved it. Everything he’d ever wanted was in that golden light, and it was his. His heart cramped. He pulled up into the carport—seeing her look up at the sound of the engine as it picked up from its idle—and went inside.

She was watching *Firefly* on DVD. She looked up and smiled, pausing the disc, when he came into the living room. “Hey, you. You’re pretty late tonight. Everything okay?”

He couldn’t think of why she needed to know about his day, so he said, “Just club stuff. Stayed in the clubhouse all day. Tired, though.” He closed the blinds and took off his kutte, then sat down next to her, his arm around her. She settled in, her head on his chest, and resumed the episode. He picked up her hand in his, and they linked fingers. “You eat?”

She shrugged. “But don’t cook. We can order something if you’re hungry. If you’re not, I can just grab something—ooh, I could have ramen, and you’d have to shut up about it.”

He wasn’t remotely interested in food. “Go ahead and have your ramen.” He smiled, trying to be normal, to shake off the day and his thoughts. “I mean, it’s crap, but it’s your body.”

“What I been sayin’.” She didn’t make a move to do anything about food, though. She stayed snuggled with him, and they sat quietly together and watched Mal and Kaylee go to a shindig. Juice tried to relax into the quiet domesticity of the moment, sitting with his old lady on their comfy couch in their cozy house, watching their favorite show. He held her close.

As the episode ended, Juice kissed the top of her head. “Aren’t you gonna get something to eat, baby? It’s getting late.”

She sighed. “Okay, okay. You sure you don’t want anything?” He shook his head, and she kissed him and went into the kitchen.

He called in, “maybe a piece of fruit or something, too?”

“Fuck you, Mary Poppins,” was her reply.

She brought in a glass bowl of noodles and sat next to him to eat, her legs folded up in front of her. He started the next episode and watched her. At one point she looked over, noodles hanging between her mouth, her chopsticks, and the bowl, and muttered over the mouthful, “What? You’re staring!”

She was so damn cute. He smiled. “I just like to watch everything you do, baby. It’s all sexy as hell. The way you’re sucking those noodles, for example. *Really* nice.”

She kicked him affectionately with a little bare foot, toes tipped with green polish. “Making fun will only get you hurt, you know.”

She ate about half of her noodles and took the bowl back to the kitchen. Juice followed her and folded her in his arms as she stood at the sink. He pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “God, I love you, baby. Always.”

She leaned back into him, hooking her hands over his arms. “I love you, too. Always. You sure everything’s okay? You’re vibey tonight.”

Right then, in that moment, he stopped fighting what he knew was right. He felt it almost like a *click* in his head. “I need to talk to you. Let’s go back to the living room.”

She turned in his arms and looked at him, instantly anxious. But she didn’t fight. She didn’t say anything. She just nodded and let him lead her back to the couch.

He sat down and pulled her onto his lap, running his fingers through her ponytail. He turned off the TV. Swallowing down the lump in his throat, he forced himself to speak. “I think you should call Hahn tomorrow and find out whether he would still give you a job, and whether that woman who bought your painting would still give you an apartment. You should go to San Francisco.”

Now she fought. Hard, right away. She pushed herself off his lap and free of his arms as if he'd grown tentacles. She skittered back into the deep corner of the sofa, where the two sides of the sectional met. "What are you fucking talking about?"

"Garrett told me, baby. You should have told me. You should take the chance to do what you've always wanted to do."

"Jesus fucking Christ, are you stupid? Are you seriously trying to fix my life again, you fucking asshole? I made my choice. I made it myself. I chose you. I *choose* you. I want this. I love you. Don't fuck with that. *Please.*"

Hurting her like this was going to break him. It had taken them so long to get to this place of trust and peace, and now she was cowered in a corner, fear and outrage undulating across her face. He leaned toward her; she shrank back. "Frank, you have to listen to me. I can't keep you safe. The things we're involved in now, the people on our enemies list, they do terrible, terrible things. Families used to be safe. They were off limits. These people go for the families *first*, Frank. And they do awful things. Tig's daughter was *burned alive*. They tied him down and made him watch. Lilli was tortured for *seven fucking hours*. I know, because they recorded it and sent us the video. That's what I did today, why I was late."

He was crying now. "All I thought of all day was what if they'd gotten to you instead of Lilli. I loved Lilli, but I barely thought of her today. I just kept imagining if it had been you. I can't let that happen to you. Oh, God, baby, that can't happen to you. You have to get away from me."

"You sat and watched Lilli get tortured for seven hours, you sick son of a bitch?" She was going for the part of what he'd said that she could confront; it's what she always did when she went on the defensive—deflecting the blow.

"No—no, I could barely watch any of it. None of us could. Jax made Tig watch it in case it had something we could use to hurt them. But none of us could leave. It would have disrespected her to run away from it. Frank, please. You have got to get away from here. The kind of danger around us right now—no. I can't let you near it."

She stood up and retreated to the far side of the room, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest. She looked so damn small and alone. He could see her fighting back tears. Watching her determination not to cry only broke his heart more. "Baby, I'm so sorry. I love you so much. *Always*. But you have got to go."

"Juice, please. *Please*. I don't care about any of that. I always knew I could get hurt. I don't care. *I don't care*. You wanted me to be all in. I'm all in. Please don't throw me away. Please just love me. *Please.*"

He stood up and took a couple of steps toward her, but stopped when she retreated from him. "Oh, baby, no! I would never throw you away. I *do* love you. I'm trying to love you the best way I can. *I care* if you get hurt. I care so much. This is killing me, baby. I wish I could keep you right next to me all the time, for the rest of our lives. But I can't. You have to go."

“No. *Fuck* you. *No*. I won’t go.”

“I won’t let you stay. It’s my house, not yours. I don’t want you here.” She gasped and recoiled as though he’d hit her. He hated that he’d said it. He wanted to take it back. But he didn’t.

She ran toward the hallway. She was headed for the retreat of her studio, he knew. He couldn’t let her; they had to have this out.

He grabbed her arm; she swung around and punched him in the face. *Déjà vu*. But instead of going at him as she had that night at Level Up, the night she became his, she yanked her arm free and tried to run. He grabbed at her again, but didn’t quite get her as she jerked away. Her faint made her lose her balance, and she fell. He dropped to the ground and lay over her before she could get up. She fought him wildly, kicking and flailing and pushing, saying “No” over and over in little grunting breaths. He got his arms around hers in a bear hug and pulled her tight against his chest. Still she struggled, but he was much stronger, and he held her tight, whispering, “I love you, I love you, I love you,” like an incantation.

She was finally still, panting from her exertions, but he kept her snug in his embrace. After she’d been quiet for a while, he felt her clutching fistfuls of his shirt. He heard her whisper, “Please don’t send me away. You said we’d be okay. Please.”

He didn’t know how he was going to be able to go through with this. Lying with her on the cheap, rough carpeting of living room floor, he leaned back and released one arm from around her so he could lift her chin up to see her face. She didn’t resist. Her eyes—those icy blue eyes that he saw every time he shut his own—were wide with pain. He hated himself viciously.

“Listen to me, baby. Listen to me. You are mine. You are my old lady. That will never change. There’s a great big crow on your back says so. There’s a mark over my heart that says the same thing. It’s still you and me. When things calm down, you can come back. I will miss you every second. But I’d rather miss you because you’re 100 miles away from me than because somebody killed you to hurt me.

“And it’s only 100 miles. I can come see you. We can Skype every day. We can make this work. I’m not throwing you away, baby. I’m just putting you up for safekeeping.”

He brushed her lips with his. She pulled away and bent her head to his chest. Muffled against his shirt, she said—quietly, without force, “Please, Juice. I want to be with you. I don’t want to go.” Her fight was gone. She was just raw and vulnerable and begging him to let her stay.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight against the need to keep her. He kissed her head. “I don’t want you to go, baby. But you can’t stay.”

## CHAPTER 30:

“It Doesn’t Matter,” Alison Krauss

Martin Hahn was delighted that she’d changed her mind, as was her new patron. The job and apartment were waiting for her. She’d move in a couple of days before her show and start working right away. She’d already shipped the paintings for the show to the gallery. Garrett was going to follow her in his van with her things, the stuff of her life. The most important thing, though, was staying back in Charming.

Was sending her away.

She walked around these last days in a dizzy fog of confusion and hurt. She didn’t understand. He’d told her over and over that this was the life, and she’d told him she was in. She watched her brother get shot and almost die, and she was still in. She had buried friends, and she was still in. She had finally relaxed and really trusted him. She had given herself over to life as his old lady. And as soon as she embraced it and let her guard down, he ripped it all away from her.

Told her he didn’t want her with him.

Told her she didn’t have a home with him.

She wanted to be angry. She wanted to hate him. It would make all this so much easier. But she was just so fucking sad. She couldn’t even be mad at Garrett. She’d never thought to tell him not to say, and anyway, he wasn’t the one doing the hurting. Better to be numb and lock the sad away.

She’d go. It didn’t matter. He didn’t want her here.

OOO

She’d held a painting back from the shipment to Hahn. This one she wrapped in brown kraft paper and drove over to the university campus. She left it in the art department office, in the care of the secretary. She taped a professionally produced invitation to her show to the paper, along with a note:

*Dear Andre,  
Maybe it’ll be worth something some day.  
Thank you for everything.*

OOO

The morning after he’d told her to go, she stood for a long time staring at herself in the bathroom mirror. She wasn’t thinking or looking or really anything. Just staring, like a trance. She shook it off and brushed out her hair, gathering it up, as usual, into a ponytail.

Then she'd just stopped midway, her arms up, her hands in the process of gathering and banding, beset by a sudden certainty. After a second, she picked up again and finished with the band. But then she'd gone into her soon-to-be-former studio and picked up a long, sharp scissors. She'd reached back and lopped off the tail without a second thought. There had barely been a first thought. She tossed it in the trash and put the scissors back.

OOO

She was leaving in the morning. Her studio was stripped, Garrett's van loaded up. There was almost no trace of her left in the house. She hadn't had a chance to leave much of an impression. All that was left was her clothes. She felt like she'd just unpacked them.

She had just brought a chair into the closet so she could go through her things on shelves. She remembered standing on it before, him coming in and grabbing her up to take her to the bed.

She stood there and tried to think what clothes she needed to have with her in San Francisco. And then she realized that she needed it all. This was his house. That's what he'd said. Starting tomorrow, she wouldn't live here. She climbed up on the chair and started to load her arms up with everything. It was too much to hold, so she just threw armloads of stuff onto the floor until the shelves were clear. Then she got down from the chair and shoved everything into boxes.

She was throwing armloads of clothes on hangers into boxes when he came into the room. He must have just gotten home; he was still wearing his kutte. She'd barely spoken to him in the days since he'd told her to go. She'd just moved past him, existing in the same space. They'd still slept in the same bed, and she'd let him into her whenever he'd pulled her to him, hard and desperate. But afterward she'd roll away and curl into her ball, waiting for sleep.

Now he put his hand on her as she was coming out of the closet with another armload. "Baby, are you taking it all? You're not leaving anything?"

She pulled out of his grasp and dumped the clothes. She turned and ducked around him, back into the closet for more. She grabbed an armload and turned again. He was standing in the closet doorway, blocking it. She stood there, too tired and detached to fight.

He reached out and touched the choppy ends of her hair. She didn't flinch or react. "Please don't leave like this. I'm so sorry I'm hurting you. But this is the right thing. We're not over. We're not. Unless you want to be. I want to be you and me, always. I want to know you're with me before you go."

He pulled the clothes out of her hands and dropped them on the floor. He put his hands around her face. "Please, baby. Please be with me."

He leaned in to kiss her. She pulled back, but he held her head and kept coming. He moved his lips on hers gently, whispering, "Please, baby," over and over, his breath tickling across her skin.

She fought to stay numb, but she couldn't. She loved him. She loved his touch on her. She loved the way the word "baby" sounded in his mouth. She wanted to be with him. Always. That's why all this hurt so much. She whimpered and grabbed his kutte in her fists.

He let a breath out in a rush and clutched her close. She slid her hands under his kutte and around his back, getting as close as she could, enveloped with him in the leather. She opened her mouth, and felt his tongue against hers. She wasn't close enough. She put her arms around his neck instead and climbed on, her legs around his waist, inside the kutte.

"God, baby, thank you," he gasped against her neck. He turned and started to walk them out of the closet. Then he stopped and bent down. She looked down to see her own kutte right on the top of the pile of clothes he'd taken away from her. He grabbed it and carried it with them to the bed.

He gently pulled her loose and stood her at the side of the bed. While she quietly watched, struggling with the emotions roiling in her heart and mind, he slowly unbuttoned her cotton shirt and pushed it off her shoulders. He pulled it free of her arms and held it up to his face, breathing deeply. Then he dropped it to the floor.

She reached back to unhook her bra, but he caught her arms and brought them forward again. He put his arms around her and unhooked it, pulling it off her shoulders and down her arms. He went to his knees then and wrapped his arms tight around her, his cheek against her skin. He stayed like that, pressed close to her, holding her in his strong arms. She closed her eyes and tried to feel all of him. Then she put her hands on his head. He made a single sob, and turned his head to kiss her belly.

He unbuttoned her jeans and slid his hands under the waistband, under the fabric of her underwear, and pushed both off her hips. He kissed the knot inked at the apex of her thighs and slid her jeans and underwear down until she could step out of them.

She was standing there naked in front of him. She felt open and raw and so scared. She had a life here. She had love here. It was kneeling in front of her. She didn't want to go away from that. She had finally figured out what she wanted, what she needed. It was here.

He stood up and picked up her kutte from the bed. "Put it on for me, baby."

She did as he asked. It seemed she always did as he asked.

He straightened her collar and traced one edge of the placket down to the bottom, his finger grazing her nipple as it drifted past. Just that light, slight touch made her muscles clench, and her skin puckered and pebbled.

She grabbed him by his kutte and pulled him close, sliding her arms around him, under his t-shirt, raking her hands over the contours of his muscular back. She was too small to reach his lips if he didn't lean down, so she pressed her face to his chest.

He kissed her head and set her back from him. He took off his kutte and pulled his t-shirt over his head. As she did every time she saw his bare chest, she marveled at its beauty. She put her fingers on his new tat, the one she'd made for him. He put his hand over hers and squeezed. Whispering, "You and me, baby. You and me. Always," he lifted her hand and kissed it. Then he stripped off the rest of his clothes and put his kutte back on. He caught the edge of hers in his fingers and pulled her close again, wrapping her up in his leather.

He ran his hand over the denim on her back. "See? We were meant to be, baby." He picked her up by the waist and lifted her until her face was level with his. He kissed her, his tongue sliding into her waiting mouth. She wrapped herself around him, as she'd done so many times before. He let go with one arm and slid that hand between them, pushing himself against her. She shifted down to accept him and breathed deep as he filled her.

He stood in the middle of the bedroom with her in his arms; they kissed deeply, rocking together. She rode him, slowly, trying to feel every inch of him sliding in her. Then he laid her down on the bed, his body covering hers. He began moving strongly into her, grunting. They hadn't stopped kissing; she felt like they were trying to meld together with their tongues. He pulled up, arching his head back with a groan. His kutte made a shield around her; she was surrounded by the smell of him—leather and sweat and blood and fire. Her heart ached.

He picked up the pace, pounding into her now. She felt the familiar pressure and heat spread through her. She heard him chanting, "Come on, come on, come on; baby, come on." He pulled out of her and flipped her over. She didn't come up to her knees. He spread her wide and slid into her again, looming over her, propped up on his hands. The pressure was building and building, but she didn't reach out to meet it as she usually did. She let it come to her. He was straining over her; she felt drops of his sweat hit the back of her neck.

And then it was on her. She closed her eyes and tried to relax into it. He was pleading breathlessly as he moved over her, "Come for me, baby, please, baby." She wanted this to last and last. But he was going so hard and so fast now, and the urge was growing to grind against him. Finally, she couldn't resist, and she pulled her knees up under her just as he thrust into her. She came instantly at the deeper penetration, rocking hard on him, panting, but otherwise silent. Then he rose up off his hands and grabbed her hips, slamming into her with a long, relieved groan.

He lay on his side next to her and combed his fingers through her short, disordered hair. He pulled a little at her denim collar. Still panting, he asked, "Are you with me?"

She lay prone and looked at him, taking in his deep, dark eyes, his strong jaw, his beautiful mouth. She put her hand on his cheek and ran her thumb lightly over his cheek.

She nodded.

## CHAPTER 31:

### “From Your Boy,” The Queers

She was packed. Garrett was antsy to get on the road so he could get back to Marnie, who wasn't feeling great. Somehow, Garrett had gotten through this scene with his relationships with Juice and Frank intact. Juice wanted to blame him for this, but he was right. Obviously he was right, because Frank was leaving. Even she didn't blame her brother, and she was fucking miserable. She blamed him, though. He knew that.

She'd moved through the house, through his life, these past days like a ghost, barely speaking to him. She'd handled the business she needed to handle as though everything was normal, but afterward she would just turn off. She'd cut off her ponytail; he didn't know whether that was sorrow or spite or what. She was losing weight again.

He wondered if this is what she'd been like after she'd cut herself, if this is what had driven Garrett to confront him at the clubhouse that day in January. He hoped the fulfilled dreams that were waiting for her in San Francisco would shake her out of this fugue and put her straight again.

He was so worried about sending her off on her own like this, his scrappy little punk rock girl who was afraid of the dark. Sticking to this decision was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

But as the violence around the club continued to grow—adding home invasions targeting Sons and their families into the mix now—Juice was more and more convinced that this was right, for her and for them. And every time he wavered, he thought of Lilli.

Last night, Frank had finally come back to him, at least partway. It was the first time since he told her to go that he really felt her presence with him. But she'd never said a word; she'd barely made a sound. They'd made love over and over. She'd wrapped herself as tightly to him as she could get, but she'd never spoken even once the whole night. This morning, she'd put her shell back up. She was composed but distant. She spoke when she had something to say. Not often.

Frank came out of the house carrying Smeagol in his carrier. He was yowling already. If that kept up, it would be a long drive indeed. She sat him in the passenger seat and closed the door. She walked to the back of the car and leaned on it, looking right at him.

It was time to say goodbye.

He walked up to her and put his hands on her hips. He looked into those vivid blue eyes. “I love you, baby. We're gonna be okay.”

She laughed sadly and dropped her head, but he put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face back to his. “We are going to be okay.” He pushed her glasses to the top of her head and kissed her hard, trying to put all his love into it.

When he pulled back, she took a deep breath and cleared her throat; he'd noticed her doing that when she needed to talk and wanted to sound normal. "I get about the whole 'road clause,' or 'prison clause,' or whatever it is with you guys, whatever applies here. Separation means permission. I get it. So—"

He cut her off. "Baby, I plan to jack off to you on Skype every single night. Starting tonight. No Crow Eater is gonna satisfy me. I'm yours. Don't you worry. What about you? Do you need more than that?"

She gave him a weary little smile. "I don't want anybody else. Besides, think how long it would take before I'd trust anybody enough to get naked. Way too much work. Even when you do dump me all the way, I'll be on my own."

"Frank, please stop. Do you really not trust me at all?"

Barely above a whisper, she said, "You take everything." She slid her glasses back to rest on her nose and pushed off the car. She cleared her throat again. "I should go." She turned toward the driver's door.

That couldn't be the last thing she said before she left. He grabbed her arm and turned her back. "Baby, wait. I need to hear it before you go. Do you love me? Are you with me?"

She looked at him, her eyes bright with tears he knew she'd refuse to shed. She pulled at his shirt, right over his tat. She laughed that sad little laugh again. "Always."

She got into her car and drove away. Garrett pulled off behind her in his van.

Juice stood in the street and watched until he saw her little yellow beater turn, several blocks down. He went into the too-empty house and straight to the bedroom. It smelled strongly of their love, and he wished he'd never have to leave. He looked at the bed, still unmade, the headboard she'd made standing behind it.

She'd left her kutte behind, folded neatly on her pillow.

THE END