

The Rose and the Thorn
A Sons of Anarchy Story
By Susan Fanetti/laughingwarrior

Prologue

He had his back to the bay doors, but Opie knew the car that was pulling into the lot was a beaut. He turned around—yep. Plymouth Barracuda fastback. '68, he thought. Gleaming black. A real car, in great shape. He walked to the front of the bay, wiping his hands on a shop towel, and watched as the car pulled up near the bays and stopped.

And then the driver stepped out.

It had been more than two years since Donna had been killed, but Opie still hadn't thought much about other women, or even noticed them, really. He'd been pretty sure that that part of him was in the ground with the wife he'd loved. Still loved.

But he noticed the woman who swung out of the driver's seat and stood up. As she closed the door and walked toward him, he took a beat and looked her over. She was tall—not nearly as tall as Opie, of course, even with the heels of her black boots, but definitely taller than most women. Her long, long legs were clad in jeans that fit snugly enough that he could tell those legs were strong and lean, but not painted-on tight, like the jeans most of the women around the MC wore. She wore a plain white t-shirt and a simple black leather jacket. Her dark brown hair was full, long and loose. It framed an elegantly beautiful face. Her whole look was pure class. *Damn.*

He registered all that in the second or two it took her to approach him. He took a step and asked, "Something I can help you with?"

She pushed a pair of classic Wayfarer sunglasses up onto the top of her head, catching her hair back and exposing dark-fringed, crystalline grey eyes. *Damn damn damn.*

"Hi. Yeah, I think the timing chain is going out, and I was wondering if you could take a look." Opie headed to the car, and she followed. "Sure," he said. "Though I heard you pull up, and that engine sounds pretty good. Timing chain would make a racket."

Her smile was full and bright. "Yeah, I know. But I'm hearing a little rattle when I start it up, and I don't want to wait until I get caught out someplace."

"Fair enough. No problem—I need to finish that truck," Opie gestured into the bay, "before I can take a serious look. About an hour or so. And it's getting late, so if you're right, it'll be tomorrow before it's done."

"That's cool. I'll have someone pick me up, and I can hang around the house tomorrow." "Okay. I'll just need to get some information." Opie walked around to the side of the car, peering into the interior. "It's a great car. Did you buy it restored?"

“Fuck you,” she laughed, “it’s all original.”

Opie turned to her at the expletive and smiled broadly. All that beauty and grace, and the mouth of a sailor. He was completely charmed.

She blushed lightly. “Sorry; that was saltier than was necessary. Sometimes I forget my manners. Um . . . anyway. My dad bought it new and coddled it for decades. It came to me when he died. I guess I’ve had it about 9 years, then.”

“This is the last place you need to worry about saying ‘fuck,’” Opie laughed. “And you’re doing your dad proud with the car.” He watched her mouth as she smiled at him. It was full and moist and . . . he cleared his throat. “Here, let’s go into the office and I’ll get your info.”

She pulled a phone out of her pocket. “Let me call for a ride, and I’ll be right in.”

Opie nodded and walked to the office to start the paperwork. She followed him a couple of minutes later. She pointed to the bays. “That’s a nice bike you’re working on back there. It’s a panhead, right? Like ’64 or so?”

Now Opie was just stunned. “’65. You know Harleys?” he asked her, his astonishment clear.

She laughed fully at his surprise. “Yeah, some. The gearhead thing is an inherited trait. And my husband rode—just solo, not in a club or anything,” she made a sort of sweeping gesture around her, indicating the compound. “But he had a sweet ’66 shovelhead.”

The strength of his negative reaction to the word “husband” gave Opie pause, but he also noted something else: past tense. Maybe she was divorced? He glanced at her left hand. There was a ring there, but it was a silver oval, not obviously a wedding ring. He took a flyer, asking what seemed like the safest question. “Doesn’t he ride anymore?”

He regretted asking as soon as her smile faded. “No. He died almost three years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” He flashed to Donna, lying on the street awash in her own blood and brains, and felt doubly guilty.

The guilt must have shown on his face, because she looked at him with real concern and compassion, though she couldn’t know how deep his remorse really went. “Hey, it’s okay. It was an innocent question—no way for you to know. It’s okay, really.” She ducked a bit to meet his downcast eyes and smiled at him. Caught up again in her enchantment, he smiled back.

He handed her the clipboard with her paperwork. She filled out her name, phone number, and address and handed it back. *Lillian Accardo*. Even her name was beautiful. She wound the ‘Cuda keys off her ring and handed them over. He fed them through a paperclip and hung them on the clipboard.

Just then, a cab pulled into the lot and honked. Lillian turned and waved, then turned back to Opie. Her ride was here.

“Okay, Lillian. I’ll call you later today with an estimate.

She smiled at him again. “It’s Lilli. And thanks.” She held out her hand.

He caught it in his and held it an extra couple of beats, holding her eyes, too. “You’re welcome, Lilli. I’m Opie.”

Her eyes didn’t stray from his as her slender fingers gently squeezed his much-bigger hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Opie.”

She pushed the Wayfarers down over her eyes, turned, and headed toward the cab. Opie’s focus was complete as he watched her walk away. Her ass was firm and shapely, and it swayed just right. Confidently. Not like she was selling it. He got a vivid image of wrapping his hands around her hips and pulling that perfect ass hard against him. *Damn*. He shivered as his cock swelled.

He saw her pause just as she got to the cab, then turn and head back to the office. He was grateful that the top of his coverall hung loosely around his waist. At the moment, it was covering more than the manufacturer had probably intended.

She stopped in the doorway. “This might seem like a weird thing to ask, but my husband’s bike is sitting under cover in my garage, and I haven’t even looked at it since he died. I’m sure all the rubber needs replacing, at least. Do you think sometime you could stop by and take a look, see what it would take to get it up again? I feel really bad that it’s just been sitting there, you know?” It was crazy how much the request pleased him, and he tried not to let it show. “Sure. Just let me know when’s a good time.” He pulled a generic Teller-Morrow business card out of the plastic holder on the counter and wrote his name and cell number on the back. “You can reach me this way.” He stepped forward and handed her the card, relishing the quick thrill of her fingers touching his again.

Fuck. What the hell was up with him?

“Thanks, Opie. I’ll talk to you soon.”

PART ONE: FALL

Chapter 1

Lilli was trying to grade exams, but she was really waiting for her phone to ring. She'd been thinking about Opie, the big, hunky mechanic working on her 'Cuda, since she'd dropped the car off the day before. She hadn't even flirted with anyone since Curt died. She wasn't into the martyr-widow thing, it wasn't that. She just hadn't really noticed or even thought about other men. Maybe it was because Curt had been sick for so long, and their marriage hadn't been physical like that for the last couple of years. Maybe it was because she still lived in the house they'd shared. Maybe it was because she'd loved him so fucking much. Maybe it was because . . . well, there were lots of maybes. But she still felt *married*, and she figured that was the way it was going to be—which was fine with her. Or it had been.

Her attraction to Opie really blindsided her. He'd walked up and just stood there, wiping his hands, when she pulled up to Teller-Morrow. Before she even got out of the car, she was noticing him in a way she hadn't noticed anyone in years. He was gorgeous: really tall, with broad shoulders, long hair pulled back in a ponytail, a full beard, and well-muscled, heavily inked arms. *Damn*. If the rest of him was as well-muscled as those arms . . . *damn*. And his hands—big and strong. He was wearing dark t-shirt and a mechanic's coverall, not a kutte, but he was obviously a Son.

She knew the reputation of SAMCRO, and by extension Teller-Morrow—you couldn't live in Charming and not—but it didn't bother her. She made a point not to judge people on “reputation.” As far as she was concerned, “reputation” was nothing but gossip in fancy dress. Besides, she had an old muscle car, and, since her mechanic in Stockton had retired, they were the only people around with old muscle car expertise. *That* kind of reputation you could bank on. Though she was admittedly a little rusty, she felt pretty sure there'd been some flirting—or at least some interest—going on between them yesterday. She knew for sure on her end, of course, but she thought she'd caught a vibe from him, too.

Still, she felt really anxious about having asked him to check out Curt's shovelhead—to the point that she almost regretted it. It seemed lame in retrospect. The biker version of inviting someone up to “see her etchings” or whatever. She really did want him to look over the bike, but she had to be honest, at least to herself—she'd had ulterior motives, too.

He hadn't said anything about it when he called last night to tell her that yes, indeed, the 'Cuda's timing chain was compromised and he'd have to keep the car overnight before he could work on it. He *did* sound a little impressed that she had correctly diagnosed the problem so early. Men just never could get their heads around the idea of a woman who knew cars at all. Usually that pissed her off, but she thought that Opie's surprise was pretty cute. For one thing, he was much cooler about it than most—surprised but willing to believe. For another, well, he was pretty damn cute himself.

Yeah. Of *course* it was just too weird to ask the new guy she thought she might like to come over and check out *her dead husband's motorcycle*. Jesus. What the holy hell had she been thinking?

So now she was waiting for him to call when the ‘Cuda was ready. And trying to work and not think of big, hunky biker mechanics with long hair and inked muscles. And also trying not to mentally beat herself bloody for behaving like a vapid goose.

She pushed the chair back from her desk and went to the kitchen. She needed a beer. She was standing at the counter taking a long pull from the bottle when her phone chimed. It was him.

“Hello?”

“Lilli? It’s Opie at Teller-Morrow.” She didn’t like that he added that last part—if he thought he needed to clarify how they knew each other, it probably meant that she hadn’t made the same kind of impression he had.

“Yeah—hi, Opie. The ‘Cuda ready?”

“It is. Replaced the timing chain—and I had the boys give it a wash and wax afterward. Hope that’s okay.”

“It’s awesome—thanks, Opie. I’ll be by as soon as I can arrange a ride.”

There was a longish pause on his end. She was beginning to think the call had been dropped—*fucking Charming reception*—when he said, “Well, if getting a ride is a hassle, I could pick you up—if, uh, you don’t mind riding double with me back to the garage.”

She hadn’t been on a bike since Curt had become too sick to ride. She’d loved it. She missed it. But it was all bound up in her memories of Curt. And yet. She realized how besotted she already was with Opie when her head started spinning out fantasy scenarios. The idea of straddling his bike, feeling him nested between her legs and arms, the engine thrumming deeply under them . . . She felt a spasm deep down and closed her eyes. *Chill out, woman. What the fuck?* “Wow, I don’t mind at all. It would be a big help, actually. Are you sure it’s not too much trouble?”

“No trouble at all. I could come over around 5, if that works for you.” Another pause. “If you want, I could take a look at the shovelhead while I’m there.”

“Oh, Opie, thank you. That would be awesome. You have my address, right?”

“Yep, it’s on your paperwork. Okay. Well, I’ll see you later on, then. Bye, Lilli.”

“Bye, Opie. And thanks again, really.”

Chapter 2

Opie spent the rest of the afternoon tinkering with the panhead and watching the clock. It was really quiet at T-M, on all fronts. Most everybody was off doing their thing, whatever it was. He could have picked Lilli up at any time. He put it off until 5 because—well, why the fuck *had* he put it off until 5?

Though he hadn't fully understood what he was doing at the time, he eventually realized that he'd put it off because evening seemed more date-like, and 5 was the latest he could make it and still have it sound like it was about business. Just in case.

He was acting like a fucking teenager.

Between being with Donna and then being without her, it had been a lot of years since he'd started something new with anyone. He was a one-woman kind of guy, no matter what—home, on the road, anywhere. So he wasn't sure his skills were at their peak. But he thought he'd felt some interest coming from Lilli, too. He had no idea what he thought or expected would happen when he got to her house. He wasn't even sure what he *wanted* to happen, really, except that he wanted to know that she was interested too.

He didn't understand why he was acting like this. He didn't even know the woman. Somehow, though, it felt like he did.

He stood up and looked at the clock again: 4:15. Okay. He packed up his tools and nodded to the two mechanics on the clock until closing. He crossed the lot to the clubhouse. When he got to the clubhouse apartment, the squalid little room he'd been crashing in lately, he took a quick shower and changed into a clean shirt and jeans. He pulled on his boots and slid his kutte over his shoulders. His hair was still wet, so instead of wearing the beanie he usually wore, he pulled his hair back up into a ponytail. He started to pick his rings up off a shelf, considered, and put them back down.

He didn't want to get there too early, so he figured he still had a couple of minutes. He called Donna's mom and asked to speak to his kids. He'd sent them to Southern California to live with her a few months after Donna died. After she had been so brutally killed—by his own fucking club, no less—he knew he had to get his kids as far away from this life as he could. He wasn't a good father—that wasn't self-pity, that was just fact. He loved them deeply, but he had missed most of their childhood, and he had not been able to connect with them since his return from prison. Without Donna, and with him fully back at the Sons' table despite what had happened to her, the distance between him and his children was a chasm he couldn't cross. There was no safe place in his life for children. He wanted them away.

But still he called a couple of times a week, and tonight he really wanted to talk to them. They didn't really want to talk to him, however, and after a strained 10-minute call, he told them he loved them and hung up.

For a long moment he just sat on the end of the unmade bed and mulled things over. What did he think he was doing, hoping to start something up with Lilli? She was so obviously not a part of this world; the fact that she could recognize an old Harley didn't mean anything. What business did he have even considering bringing his life down on someone like her? No way. He was being a selfish asshole. *No way*. He would pick her up and bring her back to the garage for her car.

Then he would say goodbye. The end.

Thus resolved, he headed out to his bike.

Chapter 3

There wasn't a street in Charming Opie didn't know, so he rode straight to Lilli's house without a second thought. She lived on a tidy little street in one of the quieter sections of town. The houses were all midcentury bungalows, mostly of the vaguely Spanish style that had dominated California neighborhoods forever.

Lilli's blacktopped driveway ran the length of her house and stopped at her detached garage, well back from the street. He turned in, pulled even with her front porch, and cut the engine. He sat for a second after he took off his helmet and took in the homey vista of her house, wanting, even in his resolve not to pursue anything, to fill out his image of her.

Opie had a strong visual sense and appreciated the harmony of a well-appointed house or garden. Lilli's house was small and well tended. She, or someone, had made the best out of the clichéd architecture. The yellowy-beige stucco walls and red-tiled roof were accented with touches of vivid color. The frames around the leaded casement windows were painted green. The heavily planked, arched front door was a deep violet. The yard was landscaped well and simply—the do-it-yourself work of someone with a knack for it. There was a rustic little bench on the porch surrounded by big glazed pots filled with lush flowers in a riot of color. A large iron scrollwork piece hung on the wall next to the door. The effect was classy, peaceful, and sweet. No surprise.

Again he was struck by how different they were. Nowhere in his life was there a place of such quiet comfort. But something inside him called out for it.

He swung off the bike and walked up to the door. He looked for a bell, didn't find one, took a deep breath, and knocked. When the door opened a few seconds later and she stood smiling up at him, he lost in a rush the breath he'd just taken, and he felt his resolve falter under the considerable weight of his lust.

What she'd been wearing the day before had concealed a lot. Today, her dark hair was pulled up and clipped loosely at the back of her head. Several soft tendrils had escaped and framed her beautiful, clear face. She was wearing a fitted pale blue t-shirt with a "U"-shaped neckline. It showed a bare, graceful collarbone—Opie had a thing for collarbones, and he imagined leaning over and pressing his mouth to it. The shirt was tucked into another pair of snug-but-not-tight, low-slung jeans cinched across her hips by a wide black leather belt with a plain silver buckle. It was just sheer enough to hint at her bra underneath.

Everything worked to show her great figure to its best advantage. Her breasts were full but not huge. Her arms were lean and well-defined. Her waist was trim, her stomach flat. Her hips flared out just right. And her legs—long and lean and sexy as hell. She had the figure of a grown woman. One who obviously worked out and took care.

She was barefoot. Her feet were slender, her toes unvarnished. And yes, she was tall. Opie still towered over her, but not as much as he was used to. Donna had been tiny and had barely come up to his chest. From his perspective, Lilli came up to about his chin.

“Hi, Opie,” she laughed.

He realized that he’d just been brazenly checking her out, and he jerked his head up to her face. On the way up, he noticed what looked like the trailing end of a tattoo barely curling around from the nape of her neck. *Christ. Ink, too.* He was screwed.

“Hi.” His voice actually croaked. *Fuck.*

She took a step back. “Thanks for this. Come on in. Can I get you a beer?”

He followed her into her house. “Yeah, that would be great.” When she turned and headed toward the back of the house—to the kitchen, he guessed—he saw that the “U” of her neckline continued on the back, showing several inches of what looked like an elaborate botanical tattoo; he’d seen the curling tip of a vine at the nape of her neck. He could see a hint of the rest of it under her shirt—it followed her whole spine. And it wasn’t the only ink on her back. He stopped in the foyer to compose himself, closing his eyes and taking another breath.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked around. The floor was dark parquet. The walls, surprisingly, were white. There was a wall covered with framed photos on his right. To his left a wide, arched opening led to what was probably a living/dining room combo, though she had it set up more like a living room/office. Curious, he stepped in, then called out, “Your place is really nice. Mind if I have a look around?”

There was a pause, and then he heard her call back, “Sure. Go right ahead. And thanks.” It was a big room, and there were books everywhere. The walls were totally lined, floor to ceiling, with bookcases. The only gaps were for the leaded windows, the arched entryways, and the big Spanish-style fireplace. A good-size flat-screen TV took up the middle of one bookcase, but otherwise, the cases were chock full of books, and still there were stacks of books on the floor at various points, especially around a big, old-fashioned wooden desk against a wall at the back of the room.

There was a dark Persian rug on the floor at the front of the room near the fireplace. A big leather sofa and a couple of plushy chairs sat on it. A heavy, low table sat between them—stacked with books. There was a curved leather chair/ottoman combo and a floor lamp in one corner at the other side of the room. It was a warm, comfortable room with an eclectic vibe. The books were a little intimidating—and they reminded him about something he’d seen in her car—but he loved it.

Lilli came back with two beers just as Opie had headed back to look at the wall of photos. She handed him a Corona with a slice of lime wedged in the top. “I hope Corona’s okay. I have others, but nothing else is chilled. I do have all the hard stuff, if you’d prefer.”

Looking at the photos, Opie found himself distracted. He took the beer without really looking and said, “This is great, thanks.” He put the bottle to his mouth and met the lime. He looked down, squeezed the lime into the bottle and took several deep swallows.

He was distracted by the photos, dozens of them, showing a beaming, beautiful Lilli and a man who had to be her dead husband. He looked different from what Opie had expected—big and burly, but clean cut. A little square, maybe. Huh.

There were a few arty photos of a slightly younger Lilli—black and white, soft focus. Lilli in a sheer, flowing dress, leaning out of a hayloft. Lilli on an empty beach, doing some complicated yoga pose or something. Lilli, backlit, reading in a window seat. Maybe dead husband took a photography course.

Most were vacation and special event photos: Lilli and dead husband skiing. Lilli and dead husband on a roller coaster (Lilli laughing, not screaming). Lilli and dead husband dressed in formalwear. Lilli riding piggyback on dead husband, laughing wildly. Lilli and dead husband trimming a Christmas tree. Lilli and dead husband on a beach (Lilli in a fucking *spectacular* bikini, dead husband shirtless, cut, and showing a prodigious shoulder and upper sleeve piece—ah, okay). Lilli and dead husband on his bike. Lilli and dead husband at their wedding (Lilli looking radiant). Lilli and dead husband on the front lawn of this house, standing arm-in-arm behind a “SOLD” sign.

Lilli caressing her big, round belly. Lilli nursing a newborn. Lilli and little boy. Dead husband and little boy. Lilli, dead husband, and little boy. Little boy. Little boy. Little boy. Little boy with dark hair and dark-fringed, crystalline grey eyes. Little boy never more than a toddler.

Opie turned and looked at her. She met his look and held it silently. A long moment passed before she spoke. Still she held his gaze.

“That’s my husband, Curt. He died of cancer three years ago next month. And that’s our son, Dougie. He died four years ago, when he was two. He climbed too high on the playground at daycare and fell and broke his skull.”

“Jesus, Lilli. Jesus.”

She laughed sharply—one harsh syllable. “Yeah. *Jesus* had nothing to fucking do with any of it.”

“I’m sorry.” He drank down the rest of his beer. He’d come within a hairsbreadth of telling her about Donna but had pulled back, understanding that this wasn’t the time to compare notes on tragic losses. But he had his first inkling right there that maybe they had more in common than he’d thought. That realization swelled something inside him. Sympathy and empathy had cooled his lust for the moment, but had intensified his desire exponentially.

Fuck it. He was going to try. He wasn’t sure he even really had a choice.

She cleared her throat and huffed out a softer little laugh. “No, it’s okay. I don’t really have people in my house, so I forget that there’s this whole wall of dicey history right here at the front door. To me it’s just my family—it’s kinda like they say goodbye to me when I leave and greet me when I get home. It’s less lonely, I guess, or something.” She sighed and shrugged. “Anyway.”

Opie felt a lump growing in his throat and tried to cough it away. There wasn't anything he could say here, so he didn't. He asked instead, "Do you still want me to take a look at the shovelhead?"

Lilli smiled at him. "*Thank you* for ending *that* awkward moment!" she said brightly. "Yes, let's. It's in the garage, so we'll go through the back." She turned and walked back toward the kitchen. This time, Opie followed.

In the kitchen, she turned and took his empty bottle. "Want another while we're here? Or something else?"

"Another beer would be great for now." While she was disposing of the empties, he looked around the kitchen. Again, her taste struck him exactly right. The kitchen was, he thought, mostly original and in great shape despite its age. Even the appliances were old—or, maybe they were new and just "retro" style. At any rate, it worked. The only nod to modern style was the tall, wide butcher block island in the middle, with two barstools on one side.

He looked over and saw her leaning into the fridge to pull out the beer. He got an eyeful of her amazing ass, and the urge to walk up and grab her hips almost overwhelmed him. He clenched his fists at his sides. He was swinging back and forth between the equally powerful urges to hold her and to fuck her. He didn't know what the hell was going on with him, but this caveman shit he was feeling around her was really not his deal.

She handed him another Corona and gave him a little sideways smile. "Notice the lime? The beer comes out better if you push it into the bottle first."

He laughed. "Yeah, thanks."

"Garage is out this way." She slid open the patio door and stepped into the back yard.

He followed her as far as the patio before he stopped again. "*Fuck*, Lilli. This is incredible."

The patio was plain concrete and typically furnished: gas grill, round table, four matching chairs, umbrella. But Lilli's back yard was like something out of the fantasy novels he'd read when he was a kid. It was lush and green and full of hundreds of different kinds of flowering plants. Butterflies flitted all over. He could see the beginnings of a stone path meandering away from the patio and through a rose-covered archway about fifteen feet into the yard. He couldn't see much past that. He heard, but could not see, a fountain splashing somewhere beyond. Opie was awestruck and stood there literally gaping.

"Thank you," she said quietly from behind him. He looked over his shoulder at her. She was smiling with genuine pleasure. "This is where I best like to spend my time at home. Alone feels especially right, back here."

He'd been thinking about stepping off the patio and following that meandering stone path, but something in her voice, and in her words, told him that going through the archway would be a

violation. This retreat was just for her. He understood that need well. So he just said, “Well, it’s amazing. Really.”

She nodded a little thanks and gestured with her beer to the side gate, leading to the driveway and the garage. She moved in that direction, and again he followed.

She pulled up the garage door—it was the old, one-piece kind that cantilevered to the ceiling—and leaned in along the side to switch on the overhead light. It was a roomy one-car (more like one-and-a-half car) garage, and it was obvious that she wasn’t like most Californians who lived in houses without basements. She used the garage for her car, not for storage. The big space was mainly empty, since the car in question was at T-M. One wall was lined with shelves neatly holding various garage-type clutter. Against the back wall, under a fitted cover, was apparently the shovelhead. They walked back together. She hesitated when they reached the bike.

“Um. This is a little harder than I thought it would be. I seriously have not touched this cover since before Curt died. I’m kind of afraid to look.”

“Do you want me to do it? Or, you know, we don’t have to do it at all.” Opie could feel her anxiety rolling over him. He was afraid to look, too. He was on empathy overload.

“No. This is silly. It’s not like Curt’s ghost is going to leap out at us.” Opie had his doubts, actually. He was feeling Lilli’s dead husband’s presence pretty strongly right here. “If it’s in bad shape because I’ve neglected it, we can fix that.” She took several long swallows, finished her beer, and set the empty on a shelf. “Okay.”

She reached down and unfastened a few tabs at the bottom of the cover, then started to pull it up over the bike. Opie set his own empty bottle on the floor and stepped up to grab the other side of the cover. The aging vinyl coating cracked audibly, and Lilli flinched. Opie looked over and saw that her eyes were shimmering with almost-tears. The urge to hold her was definitely dominating right now.

The cover came off in a puff of dust, and there sat a nearly showroom-quality ’66 Harley-Davidson shovelhead, looking ready to ride right out into the sunset. It was gorgeous. It was even almost shiny. “Holy shit,” Opie whispered. He looked over at Lilli, who was standing silently with her arms wrapped around her waist. A few tears had topped over, but she wasn’t actively crying. She was just quiet and still. He didn’t know what to do. It felt like an intrusion, though, to say anything or to keep looking at her, so he squatted down to take a closer look at the bike.

In a minute or two, she took a breath and let it out. “Well,” she said, “it looks pretty good, doesn’t it?”

Opie stood up and brushed his hands off. “It looks great. I mean, you don’t want to turn the engine over until the gaskets have all been replaced—you start it now, and you’re likely to get fuel and oil spraying every which way when the gaskets crack like the cover did. And the tires will need replacing for the same reason. You were right that anything rubber will need an update.

And the fluids will need refreshing. But otherwise, as far as I can tell right now, it's practically perfect."

She turned and smiled at him, and he could tell that her melancholy moment had passed. "That's great news. You have no idea how relieved I am. If I'd let this bike rot because I was being a big baby about it—well, that would have sucked. I'm not sure what I want to do with it, though. I don't think I can sell it."

"Don't you ride?" Opie asked.

Lilli looked at the bike, and then back at him. "I can—well, I could. But, well," she hesitated, then shrugged. "I never really enjoyed wrapping my hand around the throttle as much as I loved wrapping my arms around my guy. Being a passenger is more fun for me. That probably kicks my feminist cred all the way to hell, but there you have it."

Opie was wrestling his inner caveman again, so it took him a beat to respond. "I don't think it makes you any less strong, for what it's worth. It's a good feeling, that closeness."

As they stood looking at each other, Opie felt something important snap into place between them. He took a step toward her.

Lilli broke the moment. "Hey—I don't suppose you want to stay and have a bite to eat? Or should we get back to the garage before it closes?"

He took a breath. Okay, too soon. Made sense—they were still standing in front of her dead husband's bike, probably with his jealous ghost astride it. "The garage closed at 5, but that's not a problem. We can head back anytime. I'd love something to eat—but you don't have to cook for me."

"I actually like to cook. I'm Italian. It's a thing we do. So if you don't mind, I'd like to cook for you. Or is that weird? It's probably weird." She looked away, obviously nervous. He kinda liked that, liked what he thought it meant. She picked up the tarp and started to fold it—well, break it, actually. "I'll need a new one of these, I guess."

Opie grabbed an end and helped. "It's not weird at all. I'd like that a lot."

"Cool. I went to the market yesterday and have a couple of steaks in the fridge we could grill. Maybe with some pasta and a salad? Does that sound okay?"

Opie thought about the last time he'd had a quiet, home-cooked meal. Donna had made it. He pushed the thought back with a silent apology to his dead wife. "It sounds delicious."

Chapter 4

Dinner was finished, and Opie was clearing the table while Lilli rinsed the dishes. She didn't have a dishwasher, but she would let these sit, rinsed, until later.

It had been really nice, cooking for someone again. Cooking for him. Cooking *with* him, really—he'd grilled the steaks while she made some fettuccine and tossed a fresh salad (from her garden, one of the treasures through the arbor).

They'd eaten on the patio and shared most of a bottle of nice red wine while they talked. After the intensity of her family photo wall and the garage, they stayed to easier topics—movies, motorcycles, Charming news. He asked her a lot about the house and her garden, and she loved talking about that. She asked him about his life, but he clearly wasn't going to share much there. All things considered, after today, she thought that was a little unfair. But okay. No prying. No use stepping on any more landmines today, anyway.

She had not expected the exchange in her front hall. It just had not occurred to her that he would notice the photos and have questions. They were so much a part of this house, so much a part of *her*, that she didn't even think of them as something other people could or would see. And she ended up talking *way* more about her life than she ever did. She hated people having that kind of knowledge about her. It gave them too much power.

She did it again, in the garage. Blah, blah, blah. And tears! Shit. She didn't understand it. Then, for a second there at the end, she thought he was going to kiss her, and she totally freaked. Which pissed her off, because she *really* wanted to kiss him. Spending this time with him tonight was not doing anything to cool her infatuation. But it just felt wrong, standing in front of Curt's bike, after that whole emotional scene.

So, dinner. Of course. Now it was almost 8:30, and he was probably starting to feel like a hostage.

She came out of her reverie and realized that Opie was standing just inside the patio door, looking at her with a slightly odd, hesitant expression. She turned off the faucet and asked, "Everything okay?"

He started to talk, stopped, and started again. "I was, uh, wondering if," he stopped again and cleared his throat. "Would you like to take a ride with me—a real ride, before we head back to the garage? I know a place a little ways out of town that's really beautiful at night."

She just looked at him for a few seconds, letting the implications of his invitation sort themselves out in her head. She supposed it was colossally stupid to take a ride into the country, at night, with a guy she just met. Wasn't going to stop her, though; the vibe he gave was the opposite of threatening. Still, she told herself to be alert. Then she smiled. "I'd like that very much. Let me get my jacket and boots."

He watched her walk across to her bedroom, but he didn't follow. That was good. Not ready for that. Not quite yet. She took a pair of socks out of a drawer and pulled them on with a pair of low-heeled black boots, then grabbed her leather jacket off the back of the armchair next to her closet. When she came back out, he was standing exactly in the same place, looking a little stuck. She leaned around him and threw the lock on the patio door. "Ready?" she asked.

"Let's do it." They went out through the front, and she locked the door. Opie headed to his bike and pulled a leather jacket out of a saddlebag. He slipped off his kutte, pulled on the jacket, and put the kutte back on.

When she got to his bike, he handed her his extra helmet. His hand hung in midair for a second, as if he were deciding something, and then he reached up to her head. She flinched the tiniest bit and he stopped, hand still hovering. He raised his eyebrows a little, asking for permission. She took a breath—*Calm the fuck down!*—and gave him a small, embarrassed smile. He reached back and gently pulled the clip from her hair. As her hair fell in soft waves over and past her shoulders, he said, "I don't think this would feel very good under the helmet." He handed her the clip and swung his leg over the saddle.

Lilli laughed sheepishly, "You're right. Thanks." She slid the clip into her pocket, then leaned back slightly to shake her hair back out of her face and strapped the helmet on. When she looked up again, she met his eyes. What she saw in them sent a thrill up her spine. Even in the twilight, she could see fire there. Then he slid his night riding glasses on and strapped on his own helmet while she climbed on behind him.

She settled herself and put her hands on her knees. She wasn't ready to presume anything yet, despite the signals she was picking up. But he reached down with a now-gloved hand and pulled her right arm around his waist, holding it close and squeezing her hand for a moment. She gladly took the hint and wrapped her other arm around him, too, linking her hands. *Oh my God, this feels so good.* It was so sexy, but it was more than that. She felt *connected* to him. It scared the shit out of her, actually, but she decided to think about that later. Right now, this felt like something she *needed*.

He sat there for a second or two, his head tipped down slightly. Then he kicked the engine to life and turned the throttle. Lilli closed her eyes as the vibrations traveled up through her body. And they started off.

One of the things about riding a Harley with someone: there's not a lot of talking you can do. So Lilli just enjoyed the ride. She'd missed it even more than she'd realized. It was a typically chilly early fall California night, and the wind was cool on her face. Opie's broad shoulders blocked most of it, so it was refreshing instead of cold. She loved the feeling of being spread wide behind a man she desired. She loved the thrum and rumble of the engine. She loved the feel of his hard abdomen under her hands. She loved it all. Without thinking about the intimacy implied by the gesture, she turned her head sideways and laid her cheek on his back. After a second, she felt his hand briefly grip both of hers and squeeze.

They rode for about half an hour, and they'd traveled well into the countryside. He pulled off the road and headed the bike a short ways up a neat dirt path. Then he stopped and cut the engine. "Okay. This is it."

She released him and climbed off. He kicked the stand down and followed. They took off their helmets, and Opie hung them on the handlebars. He tucked his riding glasses into an interior pocket in his kutte. Then he took Lilli's hand and led her up a low hill.

At the top, he gestured outward and smiled. She looked out. "God," she whispered. She hadn't noticed that they'd been climbing as they rode, but they must have been, because from here she thought she could probably see all the way to the Pacific. The lights of hundreds of sleepy houses twinkled below them on all sides. The lights of billions of stars twinkled above them.

He'd brought her to heaven.

"God," she whispered again.

She sensed him come up behind her, and she closed her eyes when he wrapped his arms around her. She leaned back against him, giving in to the sensation of being surrounded by him. He smelled of fresh air and old leather. "Lilli," he whispered in his deep, quiet voice. "Shhh," she responded. He kissed the side of her neck, just behind her right ear.

They stood like that for several minutes, until Opie stepped back and turned her toward him. With his hands holding her upper arms, he looked at her intently and said, "I need to tell you some things about me." He pulled her gently down to sit on the ground with him, surrounded on all sides by the heavens.

And he told her some things.

*

He told her that being a Son meant violence and lots of it. He told her that he'd been arrested several times and had been in prison. He told her he had two children who lived with their grandmother away from him and that he intended for them to stay away. And he told her about his wife, Donna, who'd been killed in a drive-by shooting. He told her about holding Donna's bloody, broken body in the middle of the street.

When he was done, he looked at her steadily. "Violence follows me everywhere, Lilli. It follows me fucking everywhere. The only way I can keep anyone I care about safe is to send them away from me. You need to know that. I feel something happening here"—he gestured between them—"and you need to know that."

*

She stood up and walked a few feet away, looking out over the twinkling lights below. For a long time, she said nothing, and Opie just sat where he was and let her be quiet. She was

overwhelmed. She was shocked. She was frightened. She was sad. She was already a little bit in love.

So she stood there and let all those emotions have their way while she tried to understand what she wanted—what she *needed*—to do. Reason insisted that she get him to take her to pick up her car immediately, never see him again, and return to the quiet, simple life she had yesterday.

Emotion was profoundly moved by his confession and the care for her it showed and by his pain—she wanted to hold him and love him and bring their broken souls together and be whole again. Desire wanted him more than ever. He was deeper and more real to her now, he'd given her something to know about him, the way she'd given him something to know about her, and what had been an infatuation was shaping into something greater.

Once she figured out what she wanted to do, she took another few minutes and worked out how to say it. Then she cleared her throat and turned back to him. He stood up and walked to her, his expression questioning, anxious. She met his eyes and began to talk.

“I believe everything you’ve said. I take none of it lightly. And it all scares me.” He looked away from her, and she grabbed his beard to make him face her again. “I don’t care what you do with the Sons—I didn’t think you were having teddy bear tea parties. I really don’t care about what’s legal and what’s not. People do horrible shit to each other that’s perfectly legal, so most law just seems like arbitrary nonsense to me, anyway. I care that you could get hurt, and I care that you could go away. I guess I care that I could get hurt, too.” He tried to turn away again, but she still had hold of his bearded chin. “Here’s the thing. I am completely alone in this world. No siblings. Parents dead. Child dead. Husband dead. I mostly hate the people I work with. I think most people are selfish, untrustworthy douchebags, so I have no real friends. I. Am. Alone. And I’ve been okay with that—I’ve been *good* with it, in fact—for years. Until yesterday. I met you and all of a sudden I don’t want to be alone. That’s maybe the scariest part of all this. But if you want to not be alone with me, I’d like that very much. If violence follows you and something happens to either or both of us, at least it stops with us. And by the way, I’m a lot tougher than you might think.”

They held each other’s eyes. Then Opie framed her face in both of his large hands and pulled her to him, at last, for a kiss.

*

His lips were firm and warm, and his beard was soft against her face. The kiss was gentle and lingered. Lilli leaned into him and slid her hands under his kutte and jacket and around his waist. She opened her mouth and lightly brushed her tongue against his lower lip. Opie groaned and clutched her face tighter as he intensified the kiss, pushing his tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers.

She pulled his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans. Without breaking their kiss, he unzipped his jacket to give her better access, then returned his hands to cradle her face. She slid her hands up underneath his shirt and pressed them against the warm skin of his firm, muscled back. He

growled against her mouth, and his hands slid down her neck, catching at her collar and pulling her jacket off her shoulders.

His mouth left hers and Lilli whimpered at the loss. She felt his lips feathering kisses along her jawline and down to the base of her throat. He stopped when he got to the rounded end of her left collarbone and pressed his lips against it firmly, sucking. The gesture was intensely erotic, and Lilli heard herself make a gasping little cry. She needed to be closer. She pressed her whole body against his and slid her hands up his back to hook over his shoulders. Opie growled again and canted his hips to press his erection tight against her abdomen.

The force of her lust for this man made her head swim.

“Lilli. Christ,” he whispered with his lips against her skin. He slowly slid his tongue along her collarbone, all the way to her shoulder, and then worked his way back, taking small, gentle nips as he went. Breathless and shaking, she clutched at his shoulders and arched her back.

“Opie.” The word was barely a gasp. He kissed her on the mouth, hard, his tongue deep and demanding, and his hands moved down to grab her ass and squeeze, lifting her almost off her feet and pressing her so tight against his cock she could feel it throb under his jeans. She pulled her head back a little and tried to force her brain to work. He leaned in to suckle at her neck again, and she couldn’t stop a moan. *Not helping!*

They were about to get down and dirty right here on this hill, and she didn’t want to start this thing between them off with a rut in the weeds. That had its charms too, but not now, not first. “Opie.” She grabbed his head with both hands and forced him to stop and look at her. The intensity in his expression was almost violent. He was panting. So was she. “Opie.”

She saw it when he caught hold of himself again and the animal urgency left his eyes. Now she saw worry and disappointment lurking along the edges. *He’s afraid I’m going to stop him*, she realized. And he was right. More or less.

“Can we just go back to my place now, and pick up my car in the morning?”

For a second, he seemed confused. Then he grinned and slid a hand under her hair and around the nape of her neck. He leaned in and kissed her soundly. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” He took her hand and led her down the hill, back to his bike.

They headed back to Charming and left heaven behind.

Chapter 5

When he pulled into her driveway, she leaned up as close as she could to his ear and said over the low hum of the engine, “Take it all the way down; we’ll put it in the garage for the night.” He nodded and stopped at the door so she could get off and open it for him.

While he pulled into the garage, she took the helmet off and walked toward him, intending to return it. But he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet, bringing her face—her mouth—level with his, so instead she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, the helmet dangling from her fingers by its strap. When they got to the front of the garage, she looked up, reached up with her free hand and caught the pull for the door, and brought it down, all while Opie had his face buried in the crook of her shoulder. He certainly had a thing for that spot. She liked it.

He walked them all the way to the front door that way, then let her slide down his body until her feet touched ground, so she could turn and unlock the door. They walked in together, Opie’s hands still on her hips.

Lilli pushed the door closed, tossed the helmet on the couch, took Opie’s hand, and led him down the hall to her bedroom. Not wanting the glaring light of the overhead, but wanting to see all of him, she walked into the dark room and switched on a lamp sitting on her bureau. The light was warm and golden. She slid off her jacket and tossed it on the armchair, kicked off her boots and socks, and turned to face him. He took off his kutte and jacket and tossed them both around her to land on the chair.

She started to pull her t-shirt up, but he stepped up against her and took her hands, lifting them up over her head. “Me,” was all he said, then took her shirt in his fingers and pulled it out of her jeans and up over her head. He tossed it aside. She brought her arms down to loop around his neck and fed the fingers of one hand into his hair, behind the band holding his ponytail. He reached back and pulled the band out, letting his long, golden-brown hair—*finally, finally*—fall loose. She fed the fingers of her other hand into his hair to clutch gentle handfuls, and she pulled his mouth down to hers.

The kiss was hot and deep. She took his lower lip between her teeth and bit down. He groaned and wrapped his arms around her bare torso to pull her in close. Then he took a step back and held her away. She let go of his hair and dropped her hands to his shoulders. He looked down at his hands clasping her waist—she did, too—and they both watched as he slid them across the waistband of her low-slung jeans, over her stomach and up over the ridge of her ribcage to her breasts, still bound by the smooth satin of her simple white bra. It was the first time he’d had his hands on her breasts, and she arched her back and sucked in a long breath at the pleasure. He cupped both mounds in his hands and slid his thumbs back and forth over their peaks. She reflexively clutched at his shoulders, and her fingernails dug in.

He reached around then and undid the clasp, pulling her bra off her shoulders and down her arms. She let it drop to the floor. He took the weight of each breast into his hands and pressed his palms against her swollen nipples.

“You are so beautiful, Lilli. Jesus. You hurt my heart.” He dropped to his knees and tipped his head up to take a breast into his mouth and suckle her, his hands on her waist again. She bent at the waist just a bit to bring herself closer to his mouth, resting her hands on his shoulders. His tongue lapped at her nipple. Her knees buckled and she cried out. He switched to suckle the other breast, and Lilli started to shake. It had been so long, *so long*. She was overwhelmed with sensation. She needed a second to catch her breath. “Opie, I need—,” she started, “I need—” She couldn’t finish.

He released her breast and kissed his way down to her belly button. “I know, babe,” he whispered against her, his beard tickling stomach, making it twitch. “I do, too.” He swirled his tongue in and around a few times, then continued down to the top of her jeans. She was pretty sure he didn’t mean the same need she’d been trying to express, but she didn’t care anymore.

Still on his knees before her, he unbuckled her belt and undid her button and zipper. He pushed his hands inside her jeans and slid them off her hips and down to the floor. She stepped out of them and was left wearing nothing but her light blue satin thong, while he was still fully clothed—he was even still wearing his fucking boots. She felt, for the first time, self-conscious and, without really thinking about it, she started to cover herself with her hands. He caught them both in his and held them away. “Don’t. I want to see you.”

She said, “I want to see you, too.” He grinned up at her. He stood up and pulled his t-shirt over his head.

She’d already figured out from being pressed so close to him tonight that he was well muscled, but still the sight of his bare torso was thrilling—all the more so, for her, because so much of him was covered in ink. Across his broad chest, down his sides, around his shoulders and down his arms. Across his throat. She wasn’t counting, but he had a lot of tattoos. She saw Donna’s name across his right arm.

She leaned against him, letting her hands and mouth roam all over his bare skin. She pressed her lips against his nipple and sucked it gently into her mouth. His head dropped back, and she heard him make a rumbling noise—she felt it, too, against her lips. She licked and kissed her way across his chest to suckle his other nipple, relishing the twitch of his hips against her belly. His hands were on her head, threaded through her hair, and he pressed her harder against his chest. She bit down.

“Lilli, fuck!” he gasped, and pulled her head up from his chest. He leaned down and kissed her with a new ferocity, clutching her ass in his hands. He bent his knees a bit; he slid his hands to her thighs and lifted her off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist and squeezed, craving the rough pleasure of his still-denim-clad cock pressed hard against her core. He walked to the end of her bed, leaned over, and set her down. Then he stood up.

Lilli scooted backwards to the head of the bed and rested on her elbows. She left one leg straight and bent the other up at the knee, the sole of that foot flat on the bed. She smiled sideways and tipped her bent leg out, exposing herself to him. He looked, closed his eyes, took a deep breath,

and let it out slowly. He pulled off his boots and socks, but he didn't move to take off his jeans. He put a knee on the end of the bed and crawled up to loom over her. He caught her mouth in his and kissed her deeply. He used his body to force her arms down so she was flat on the bed under him.

She wrapped her arms around his back and pushed even deeper into the kiss. Her lips would probably be bruised in the morning, but whatever. He was propped up on his elbows, his arms on either side of her head, his hair a curtain around their faces. His hands threaded into her hair, holding her head. His whole body was pressing hers into the mattress; their bare chests were practically fused. His belt buckle ground into the sensitive skin of her abdomen. Still she didn't feel close enough. She pulled her legs up and wrapped them around his waist. He groaned and flexed his hips to thrust hard against her. He dropped his head to her shoulder, panting.

He lifted his head and kissed her cheek, then pushed himself away and slid down her body. She felt suddenly cold as his warm skin left hers, and she moaned in protest. He laughed softly. "I'm not going anywhere, babe. Relax." It was the second time he'd called her "babe." She liked what it implied.

He stopped halfway and pressed a lingering kiss to the satin triangle at the apex of her thighs. She gasped and pushed herself against his mouth. He hooked his thumbs through the lace strings of her thong and pulled gently. She lifted her hips up, and he slid the rest of the way to the end of the bed with her thong in his fingers. He stood up again and pulled the small piece of satin and lace off her feet. He held it to his face for a second, then dropped it on the floor. Then—*about fucking time!*—he unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his jeans, and pushed them to the floor.

Nothing came between him and his 501s.

His bottom half was just as compelling as his top half. His legs were long and heavily muscled. He had tattoos on both hips. And at the juncture of two incredibly sexy hip muscles was his long, thick, and steelyhard cock. *Sweet Christ*. She licked her lips and started to scoot toward him.

He knelt on the bed between her legs and pushed her back. "Me," he said again. She wanted to touch him, to taste him, but his insistence on taking control was really hot right now. So she lay back on the pillows and watched. He pushed his hands slowly up the insides of her thighs until his thumbs touched her aching core. She sucked in her breath. He traced up the length of her folds and stopped just before he reached her clit. "Ah, Lilli. You're so wet, babe," he rasped. He hooked her legs over his shoulders. He put his hands under her ass and pulled her toward him. He bent down, pressed his lips against her clit, and sucked.

Holy fuck! She about exploded out of her skin. She arched all the way off the bed, only her head still making contact. She heard herself making shrill little noises, but she couldn't stop. "God, Opie! I can't—" He stopped sucking and blew gently on the swollen nub until she took a breath and settled back on the bed.

He looked up at her. "Okay?"

“God, yes. *God*, yes. It just feels so . . . *much*.”

He chuckled. “Good.” He pressed his tongue flat against her clit and licked. Her orgasm was right there. She clutched at his hair and clamped her legs to his head. She felt him slide his fingers in and pump them deep into her. Still his tongue worked her steadily. She surged hard against his mouth, his hand, and screamed. He kept going, and she screamed again. And again, her whole body curling around him.

Finally he stopped, and she relaxed back onto the pillows, dazed. He eased his fingers out and pulled up so that their heads were level. He was stretched between her legs, propped on his elbows. The hard length of his cock was pressed between them. Still breathless and shaking, she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him deeply. She tasted herself in his mouth; his beard was drenched with her. She broke the kiss and pressed her lips against his ear. “I want you inside me now. I want to feel you inside me.”

He made a sound in the back of his throat, and leaned over on one elbow. He flipped his hair to one side, then ran his free hand from her collarbone over her breast, her stomach, her hip, and finally to her leg. He pulled lightly on her thigh. She got the message and folded both legs up to his hips. He positioned himself between her thighs and just barely entered her. She tried to push against him, to bring him in deeper, but he held her hips down. “Easy, babe.” He grabbed her ankle and pulled it behind him. He wanted her to wrap her legs around his waist. So she did.

It was so hard to stay still; she wanted him deep in her. But she was letting him run this show, and so far that was working out *just fine*. She closed her eyes, waiting. Patience was not really her nature in such situations. He brought his other arm back up and slid it under her shoulder, so that he was propped again on both elbows. He nuzzled her cheek and whispered, “Hey. Open your eyes for me.”

She opened her eyes and saw him looking down at her. He watched her as he finally pushed all the way in, with one long, slow move. He was so long and thick that the stretch was a little uncomfortable. *Wow*. He stayed still, watching her with a look she could only think of as curious concern. She lay still, too, adjusting. A *human being* had once come through this same passage, so she wasn't worried. But it had been a long time, and he was not average. In any conceivable way. She flexed her hips a bit to ease a sharpish pinch, and he closed his eyes and blew out a long, shaky breath. She hadn't known he'd been holding it.

Knowing how hard he was working to stay in control and give her time to make room was somehow the hottest thing about this steamy hot night. She waited until he opened his eyes again so that she could watch him, too. Then she wrapped her arms around his back, hooked her hands over his shoulders, and flexed her legs to pull her hips up hard and fast against his, forcefully deepening the penetration even more.

“Jesus Christ!” He said in a sudden burst of held breath and then began to move inside her. She caught his tempo and surged against him rhythmically, intensifying their connection. Their mouths came together, their tongues moving in the same rhythm. Lilli could feel another orgasm

building, and she tilted her hips to get him still deeper. Opie broke their kiss with a grunt and dropped his head to her shoulder.

She was getting close again and vaguely heard herself making some kind of keening sound over and over. Suddenly, without breaking their connection or even their tempo, Opie pushed himself up on his hands. He leaned on his left hand and brought his right to press on the back of her left thigh. He stopped thrusting while he was deep inside and held her still while he got his knees under him a little and brought his left hand to the back of her right thigh. He had her spread wide, her knees up outside her shoulders. *Thank God for yoga!* He'd also taken control again; she couldn't move. She couldn't even really get her hands on him, so she reached back and grabbed the spindles on her headboard. When he started to move again, he pumped into her slowly twice, then picked up the pace with every thrust until he was slamming into her, each thrust seeming deeper than the one before.

This orgasm was cresting huge, and she couldn't shut up. "Fuck, yes! Oh my God! Harder! Oh, Opie!"

"That's it, babe. That's it. Jesus." She could hear the strain in his voice. He was barely holding on.

Fuck this; she needed to move. She used all of the considerable strength in her legs to push his hands back and bring her legs down. His hands hit the mattress, and she wrapped herself around him again. Finally freed and almost hanging from him, she bucked against his thrusts as hard and fast as she could until she came so hard she literally saw stars.

Her writhing set him off, too. He sounded an incoherent yell and grabbed her ass with one hand to pound into her for several final, deep thrusts. When he was spent, he dropped his full weight down and rested his forehead on hers. They lay there a long time, still connected and wringing wet, shaking.

*

She loved the feel of his whole weight pressing her down—he was so big—but eventually she was going to need to get at least one lungful of air. She squirmed just slightly, hoping that was all she'd have to do. It was. He sighed, kissed the tip of her nose, and rolled to the side, his softening cock sliding out of her with wet plop. He pulled her with him as he lay on his back, nesting her against his side with his arm loosely draped over her shoulder. He kissed the top of her head.

He said, "So, that was . . ."

"Astonishing," she finished and kissed his chest. "I feel quite thoroughly fucked."

He laughed and squeezed her closer. "That about sums it up."

She sighed contentedly and traced her fingers in patterns over his stomach. “I’m not entirely sure how I’m going to walk at work tomorrow, of course, but I could not care less about that right now.”

He was quiet for a minute or two. She thought maybe he was going to sleep, so she closed her eyes. Then: “Lilli . . . what do you do?”

She heard the question but didn’t really want to answer if he was asking what she thought he was asking, so she just said, “Hmmm?”

“For work. What do you do for work?”

She sighed and propped herself on an elbow so she could see his face. “I’m a teacher.”

“At the university?”

Well, that was weird. Unsettlingly so. “How do you know that?”

“I saw the parking tag hanging on your rearview. It’s a faculty and staff pass. What do you teach?”

Here we go. She looked away. “European History.”

Pause. “You’re a professor?”

Fuck. “Yeah.”

“So, what—you have a Ph.D.? You’re Dr. Accardo?”

Fuck fuck fuck. “Yeah.”

“That’s awesome. I’m impressed. Why would you be *ashamed* of that?”

She sat up. “I’m not ashamed of it. At all. I worked my ass off. It was hard. It *is* hard. I’m proud of it. But I don’t like people I don’t work with to know.”

Opie sat up too, and leaned against the headboard. “Why the hell not?”

How could she explain this? Straight out; why not: “Because of what you’re already doing. Being all impressed. It always changes the way people away from work behave around me. Now you’re going to think I’m smarter than you—I’m not; I just have an education and a set of skills. Or that I’m secretly judging the way you think or talk—if I were, I wouldn’t want to be around you.”

She met his eyes. “I don’t want you to act differently around me—I don’t want you to think differently about me—because now you know that what I do makes me an ‘intellectual.’” She made air quotes.

He pulled her against him and held her close. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t really seem like a professor. Or talk like one. Not the way I think of them, anyway.”

“Well, most of ‘em are tweedy, boring, stuck-up assholes. That’s why I hate them.”

“By the way, your smarts are obvious, but I’m not so sure you’re smarter than me. And you’re not so special, anyway. Jax, the club VP—my best friend—his old lady is a surgeon. You know, a *real* doctor. So don’t get cocky.”

She laughed. “Good. I won’t.”

She hadn’t missed how he’d hit the word “his.”

Chapter 6

Leaning against Lilli's headboard, with her beautiful naked body tucked against his, Opie felt completely wrung out. It wasn't even midnight. They hadn't even been together for *seven hours* yet, and it felt like they'd packed in the first seven *months* of a relationship. He thought about where he'd been seven hours ago—sitting on his bed in the clubhouse, deciding not to let Lilli get pulled down into the hell of his life. As his resolutions went, that one probably had the shortest life span. She'd knocked him ass over, that's for sure.

It wasn't just the sex—which had been mind-fucking fantastic. It wasn't just that she was gorgeous—but whooboy. It was that everything she did, everything she said, simultaneously surprised the shit out of him and seemed exactly right. And, like him, she didn't seem to need always to be talking. She didn't make up stories, and she didn't bother explaining why she wouldn't offer details. She told the parts she thought were necessary and left it at that.

And when he told her the truth about his life—or, at least, the truest version he could tell someone he'd only known a few hours—and gave her the chance for an out he could not take himself, the answer she gave him was both pragmatic and hopeful. She made him feel like there was still a chance to find some peace in his life. He thought maybe she was that peace.

And holy shit, the sex. He and Donna had always had a decent sex life. Donna had been willing to do a lot. But Opie had never, ever had sex with the kind of animal heat he'd just shared with Lilli. The sounds she made! She was energetic and athletic, and so passionate and responsive that Opie had spent the whole time right on the edge of orgasm. He'd had to take completely over and force her to be still several times so that he wouldn't come all over her. There was no way he could have maintained if she'd put her hands—or, fuck, her mouth—around his cock. Thank God he was stronger than her.

But damn, she was strong! Thinking about the feel of her flexed legs against his head or his hips and her sweet ass clenched in his hands made his cock twitch, even now, when he was totally exhausted.

He looked down at her. She'd been lying quietly while he mulled. He wondered if she'd fallen asleep, because he was suddenly hoping she hadn't. "Hey—you asleep?" he whispered, in case she was.

She hummed. "Mmmm. No. Just thinking."

He slid down and to his side so that they were face to face. "You okay?"

She smiled. "Definitely. Just trying to work out what happened tonight. Seems like a lot."

"I was thinking about the same thing. Did you come up with an answer?"

She laughed. "Nice—you sorted it so I'd have to go hang out on a limb first. Kudos."

“Yep. Smarter than you, I guess.”

She punched his shoulder. “Okay, fine. What the hell. Life is risk, right?”

Then she was quiet. She lay on the pillow facing him. She was mussed and a little swollen. His beard had roughed her cheeks up a little. She was lovely. Finally, she spoke again, barely above a whisper. “I know this is completely crazy. But what happened tonight, to me, is that I started to fall in love with you.”

His heart clenched—he’d meant it when he told her she made it hurt. “Lilli.” His voice was low and gruff. He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a long, slow, sweet kiss.

She pulled back. “Uh-uh, bud. I’m onto your wily scheme. No distractions. What happened to *you* tonight?”

His answer was much the same, but it seemed more complicated for him to explain. He didn’t know where to begin, so he started with yesterday. “When you asked me to come by to check out the shovelhead, I was excited. More excited than I’d been about anything for a long time. I hadn’t even thought about women since Donna died, but when I saw you yesterday, I don’t know. Something opened back up inside me. I spent the whole day thinking about you.

“But then I started thinking about my life. About what I’ve done. About what I do. What I will do. What happened to Donna—because of me. Sending my kids away from me, so they could be safe. And I decided that I had no business trying to bring you into all that. I came to your house intending to be strictly business.

“And then you were standing there, and you are so fucking beautiful. And your house is so, I don’t know, *right*. And you told me about Curt and Dougie. And what you said about being a passenger. And talking to you over the dinner you made me. Everything I saw, everything you said, it all was just *right*. I could feel you, somehow.” He felt like he was rambling, so he stopped. “I don’t know if I’m saying it right.”

Lilli had not moved or made a sound. She was still looking into his eyes, and she didn’t interject now, so Opie continued. “And then you took a ride with me. You didn’t run when I told you about the way I live. And you made me believe that maybe you could live there with me.”

He paused for a long time, trying to make the right words. Lilli just waited. “So what happened tonight, to me, is that I felt like I could still have something good in my life. And I started to fall in love with the woman who showed it to me.”

He pulled her close and tucked her head under his chin. She wrapped her free arm around his waist and squeezed.

Despite the emotional intensity of the moment—or maybe because of it—Opie was again rock hard. Lilli was about as close to him as he could get her, and the feel of her firm, soft skin

pressed against him, and her long, silky hair against his chest, had his inner caveman all wound up. That guy needed a hobby. He didn't want to just jump on her—he needed to get some damn control of himself. He leaned up on his elbow and kissed her shoulder—and he got, for the first time yet, a view of her bare back. He'd almost forgotten about her ink, none of which was visible from the front (except for the tiny curve of the vine around her neck). “Hey, babe. Can I take a look at your ink?” He needed a distraction.

She turned her head to look at him. She seemed indecisive at first, then smiled and rolled onto her stomach. Now he had a full view of her impressively toned back, the gentle, perfect swell of her ass, and the backs of her long, strong legs. He thought again how just fantastically beautiful she was to him. She had a dimple on either side of her lower back, just above each cheek.

Not much of a distraction at all.

She had four tattoos on her back, all black and grey: an intricately patterned butterfly high behind her left shoulder; three zodiac symbols, one smaller than the others, wound together under that; a familiar symbol about the size of a fist (her fist, anyway)—he thought it was the thing for yoga—behind her right shoulder; and then, literally the centerpiece, an elaborate piece starting at the base of her spine and wending its way up just over her shoulder: a climbing rose plant. The complicated vining went all the way up; at several points, starting near the base to just below her shoulder blades, a rose grew. The top four or five inches were nothing but vine. There were four fully bloomed roses and one bud, all done in black and grey with great detail. Under each rose a long, sharp thorn jutted out. A single drop of red—the only color on her back—dangled from the end of each thorn. A line of text traced the outline of the vine on the left side, reading up from the base in small, precise gothic lettering: “The rose and the thorn, and sorrow and gladness are linked together.”

He traced his fingers up along her spine. She flinched a little and looked over her shoulder at him. “They're beautiful. Especially this one.” He ran the backs of his fingers down to her waist. “Can you tell me about them?”

“The butterfly was my first tattoo. I got it when I was 18, and I didn't put all that much thought into meaning. I just thought it was pretty. I still do, but it doesn't mean anything other than I wasn't a very original teenager. The zodiac is my symbol and Curt's entwined with Dougie's. Curt had one just like it. We got ours right after we got married, and then we had Dougie's added when he came along. The Sanskrit is the symbol for 'om.' Also not very original, but meditation was important to a particular time of my life, and I got that piece to sort of commemorate gutting it out.” She stopped and put her head back down.

“And the roses?” He wouldn't ask again—he understood when a story wasn't for sharing, and he was sure there'd be some turnabout soon enough. It would be awhile—if ever—before he could tell her the story of most of his tattoos.

“That's a work in progress, I guess. Each rose represents someone I love who died: my mom, who killed herself when I was 10; my dad; my grandma, who basically raised me; Curt; and Dougie. Dougie is the bud. He didn't get a chance to bloom.”

So much loss in her life. “Why do you say it’s a work in progress?” He thought he knew the answer, and it sliced at his heart.

She lifted herself up on her elbows and turned her head more toward him so that she could meet his eyes fully. “I left space on top in case I need to add another rose.”

He held her gaze for a few beats, then leaned down to press a kiss to each rose and along the vine, working his way up to her neck. He stretched out along her back. Nuzzling at her shoulder, he felt her hand reach back to grip his hip as she pushed up against him. His erection nestled in the crack of her ass, and he groaned. *Jesus.*

She surprised him by pushing harder until she forced him to roll onto his back. She moved fast to straddle him—she was hot and wet and she *felt so damn good* resting on his cock—and grinned at him with a gleam in her eye. “Me,” she said. She took his face in her hands and leaned down to kiss him fiercely. His put his hands on her thighs, but she broke the kiss and took his hands in hers. She pulled them up over his head—“Me”—and moved down to settle between his legs. He grabbed her headboard.

She took his cock in her hand, and he knew at once that he was going to struggle to keep himself together. When she leaned in to lick and gently suckle his balls, the fight was all but over. Desperate not to act like a teenage virgin, he closed his eyes and started thinking about motorcycle parts.

She slid her hand down his length and back several times, then moved up and took him in her mouth. She held the base of his shaft with one hand, squeezing gently and steadily, and cupped his balls in the other, running her thumb back and forth across the sensitive flesh. When her felt her taking more of him, more of him—all of him!—into her mouth, he *had* to look. *Christ.*

She slid him out almost to the tip and looked up at him, still with him in her mouth. When she saw him looking at her, she smiled and swirled her tongue around his tip. He moaned and flexed his hips up. She pulled him all the way out—*no!*—and slowly ran both hands down his length, squeezing just a little as she went. Then she put him into her mouth again and sucked him all the way down.

When she had all of him in her mouth, *down her throat*, she hummed. *Fuck fuck holy Jesus fuck.*

He swung his hands down and grabbed her arms. “Lilli! Babe, stop. Please stop. Fuck. Please.”

She released him and looked up, worried, ready to be embarrassed. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No! It’s fucking amazing. But I want to finish with you, and I won’t be able to if you don’t stop right now.”

She smiled and moved up. She rose up on her knees and took him in her hand—he shivered—and straddled him again. She held him as she slid inch by slow inch down on him. He grabbed her hips and held her down. “Just—just let’s be still a minute, okay?”

She lay her chest on his and kissed his neck. She nipped at his ear and whispered, “It makes me so hot to know you’re that close.” She flexed her hips. He sucked in his breath and started listing Charming street names alphabetically in his head.

When she pushed herself back up, he released her hips and took a breast in each hand, rubbing her nipples with his thumbs. He pinched, and she tipped her head back and moaned. Her hips flexed again. Every muscle in his body was tensed with the strain of holding back. He had an idea. “Don’t move yet.”

She looked down at him and nodded, her mouth open. He moved one hand down between her thighs and found her wet clit with his thumb. She gasped. Kneading with her breast, rolling and pinching its nipple, with one hand, and massaging her clit with the other, he said, “Okay. Move the way you want.”

She didn’t at first. She just closed her eyes, making small whimpering sounds. He felt her contract her inner muscles around him. Then she grabbed her other breast in her own hand and twisted at her nipple. He had to close his eyes for a second—that was way too sexy. Her breath started coming in harsh bursts. He pinched just a little harder and rubbed just a little faster, and she started to move on him, rolling and circling and flexing her hips. He could feel his orgasm approaching again—it hadn’t been far away. He kept his own hips still and let her move until she opened her eyes and leaned over him, her hands clutching at his chest. He grabbed her hips. She was bucking hard and fast on him, her eyes locked on his, and he couldn’t hold back any longer. He held her down tight while he thrust up into her. They came together with a roar and a cry, and Lilli practically collapsed onto his chest.

He could still feel her spasming around him; every time she did, his cock twitched inside her. She made a purring kind of noise, and kissed his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, and they were just still.

After a while, Lilli lifted her head, kissed Opie chastely on the cheek and rolled off him. She yawned and sat up, looking dazed. He rolled onto his side and pulled her back down to him, her back to his front, nested liked spoons. He kissed her shoulder, and her temple, and settled his arm around her waist. She linked her fingers with his. They feel asleep together without saying another word.

Chapter 7

Opie woke with a start, fully aware that he was in Lilli's bed. He also understood right away that he was alone there. He raised his head—just as his phone went off. He had a vague sense that it had been going off already, and that was what had woken him up.

He got up and found his jeans in a heap on the floor at the end of the bed. He dug his phone out of the pocket and looked at it: Jax. Fuck.

As he flipped the phone open, he realized that he could hear—and smell—breakfast happening in the kitchen. He smiled and answered the phone.

“Yeah.”

“Ope. Where are you, bro? You okay?”

Opie pulled the phone from his ear to look at the time. Shit. After 9. He never slept late. “I’m good. There a problem?”

There was a short pause. “Nah, man. I was just surprised you weren’t here. You sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, Jax. I’m good. I’ll be in in an hour or so, maybe two.”

“Alright.” He could tell Jax was curious, at least. “We have church at noon.”

“Got it. I’ll be in soon, brother. No worries.” He hung up.

He smelled coffee. He pulled his jeans on, left them mostly unbuttoned, his belt loose in its loops, and walked to the doorway. Lilli was standing at the stove scrambling eggs. Her long hair was caught back in a ponytail, and she was wearing a little “wife beater” tank and a pair of plaid pajama bottoms resting low on her hips. Top and bottom didn’t quite meet, and he was transfixed by the exposed couple of inches of her flat stomach and curved hip. She looked over at him, checked him out, her eyes holding on his open fly—which was only fair, he thought—and smiled.

“Hey. There’s coffee on the counter behind me. I don’t know how you like your eggs, but I figured scrambled was the default. Toast is coming up.”

“Wow. Sounds great. Bathroom first, though.”

She nodded. “I’ll get your coffee started. How do you like it?”

“Black. Thanks.”

He buttoned his fly and fastened his belt as he came out of the bathroom. He'd realized while he was taking a piss that there was something important they'd missed last night, and they needed to have a talk. But when he came out, Lilli was sitting at the island with her breakfast; the place next to her was set with a mug of steaming coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs and toast. There was jam and honey and a pitcher of juice. The homey sight made his heart lurch. The talk could wait a few minutes. He walked over and kissed her forehead, his hand on the back of her head. Then he sat down next to her and dug in.

He looked up as he was scooping eggs into his mouth and saw her watching him. Feeling a little self-conscious, he finished chewing and swallowed. "What?"

She laughed. "Sorry. I was just checking you out. You are one seriously hot motherfucker, you know."

He grinned and took a sip of coffee. It was hot and strong and excellent. "Mmm. The coffee's perfect." He finished his breakfast, cleared his throat, pushed his plate back a couple of inches and turned to face her. "Lilli, we need to talk about something—about last night."

Her smile was . . . "enigmatic" was the word he thought of. "If it's what I think it is, the horse is kinda out, but there's no need to worry. Or I guess I can only say with certainty yet that there's no need to for you to worry. I can't get pregnant. And I don't have any diseases. I'd say I'm 'clean,' but saying it that way bugs me. So unless you're going to tell me that *you* have some awful disease, we're good."

"No, I'm . . ." he almost said "clean. "Healthy." It should be weird that they were both just trusting each other about this, but it wasn't.

He wanted to ask the obvious question, hesitated, then decided to ask if he could ask. "Can I ask why you can't get pregnant?"

She shrugged. "Being pregnant with Dougie was hard. There were issues. There would have been more issues if I did it again. So I had my tubes tied after he was born." She gave him a serious look. "Is that a problem?"

One thing he knew for sure was that he didn't want more kids. Ever. "Not a problem at all. I just wondered."

She stood up, collected the dishes, put them in the sink, then turned around and leaned against the counter. "I really hate to put an end to the domestic bliss we've got going this morning, but I have to teach at noon, so I need to be in my car and on the road by about 11."

He swallowed down the rest of his coffee—it really was good—and stood up. "Okay. I need to get to the garage anyway. Let's get moving, then." He brought his cup to the sink and stood in front of her, wrapping his hands around her hips. He pulled her against him and looked down at her lovely face.

She looped her arms around his neck. “We should probably shower first . . .”

He bent down and brushed his lips against hers. “Yeah, we probably should.” He felt her hands press against the back of his head, and he slid his tongue into her mouth.

After a few seconds, she pulled back just enough to talk. “Mmmm. Shower’s that way.”

He nipped on her lower lip before he lifted his head. “Okay.”

But she didn’t let him go right away. She had a lopsided little smile on her face. “What?”

“How *do* you like your eggs, Opie?”

He laughed. “Up. I like my eggs up.” She snickered. “What?” he asked again.

“You like your coffee black and your eggs up. Bitter and raw. Seems like a metaphor to me. She grabbed his beard and gave his chin a little shake. It wasn’t the first time she’d done that. It was a sweetly intimate gesture, and Opie loved it.

He grinned and swatted her rear. “C’mon, Professor. Let’s get you *thoroughly* showered.”

*

The shower was indeed thorough, so it was getting close to 11 when they finally pulled into the Teller-Morrow lot. He parked, and they climbed off. Lilli handed him her helmet. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek, taking her hand. “Your keys are in the office.”

Opie looked toward the clubhouse and saw Chibs and Juice sitting on top of one of the picnic tables near the door. They were watching with interest. *Shit.*

He knew what they were seeing. Lilli had on high-heeled black leather boots under jeans in the cut he was thinking was her favorite—snug, low rise, boot cut. A *damn* fine fit. Her hair was loose. She looked—no surprise—amazing. Luckily, she was wearing a black blazer and had a large messenger bag slung across it, because her top was a burgundy knit thing that wrapped around somehow, making a deep v-neck that he personally thought was far too low to be teaching in—not that he’d said anything to her, and not that he didn’t love the view himself. Chibs and Juice would have enjoyed that way too much.

He decided to ignore them.

Opie led her into the office, keeping his eyes straight ahead. He went over to the wall behind the desk and grabbed her keys off her clipboard. When he turned around, Lilli had her wallet out.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demanded, taken aback.

“What do you mean? I’m paying for the repair.”

His feelings were hurt. “Like hell.”

She just looked at him; he could see her working it through in her head. “But you made a ticket. Won’t it screw up the books if it doesn’t get paid for?”

“Let me worry about it, Lilli. Please. The labor was mine. The parts were no big deal. That weak timing chain is the best thing that’s happened to me in a very long time. Maybe ever. I don’t want you paying for it.”

She put her wallet away and closed the distance between them. She slid her arms around his waist. “Okay. I’m sorry. And thank you.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Her face was a little flushed when she pulled back. “Damn. I really do need to go.”

He felt weirdly anxious about her leaving, but he handed her the keys. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

When they stepped back into the lot, Opie caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye and turned toward the clubhouse. There, lined up like they were waiting for a parade, was practically every single Son: Chibs, Juice, Bobby, Tig, Happy, Kozik, Miles, and, of course, Jax. Even Piney, his pop. And the Prospects—can’t forget them. They were all sporting shit-eating grins, and they were all watching him take Lilli across the lot. Only Clay was missing.

“We have an audience,” he told her. She looked over, laughed, and gave them all a little salute. With a couple of whoops and a “Yeah!” they stood at attention and returned the gesture.

The driver’s side of her car was facing the clubhouse. As he reached for the door handle, Lilli grabbed his hand, grinned slyly, and asked, “Wanna give ‘em a little show?”

He laughed. Yes. Yes, he did. He pushed her back against the side of her car, slid his leg between hers, braced his hands on the roof, and leaned into her. He gave her a hard, deep kiss, and she returned it in kind, wrapping her arms around his waist and winding her leg around his. She grabbed his ass in both hands and pressed him against her.

Just like that, they weren’t putting on a show anymore. He moved down to nuzzle her neck. The vibrations of her moan tickled his tongue. She pushed her hips against his, and he pushed back.

Okay. This had to stop, or he was going to have her now, against her car, right in front of the whole damn club. He leaned back to look at her. She looked dazed and entirely fuckable. “Babe. You need to go, right?”

She shook her head a little and refocused. “I really do.” She gave him an odd look—maybe shy?—and asked, “Will I see you again soon?”

Soon. Oh yes. The sooner the better.

“It looks like I’m probably going to have something going on tonight, but I’d like to see you after. Could I stop by? It might be really late.”

She smiled and tiptoed up to whisper in his ear, “I’ll leave the light on for you. Come anytime.”

He pulled her against him and murmured, “Mmm. I plan to. You have a great day now, babe.”

He opened the door for her and she got in. She started the engine, revved it a little so that the guys noticed, gave him a little wave, and pulled out.

Opie stood in the lot and watched until she was out of sight. Then he turned around to face the Sons, who had started cheering and whistling like idiots as soon as she’d pulled away. He walked into the fray. “Alright, you assholes. Get it out of your system. One and only chance.”

“*Dude!* Well done!”

“Damn, Ope. *That’s* where you’ve been? Why the hell’d you come back?”

“Those legs go *all* the way up, brutha!”

“You know she’s way out of your league, right?”

He felt good and took the ribbing in good humor. Then Ratso, one of the Prospects, called out, “That must have been some Grade-A pussy, am I right, Ope?” Everyone went quiet. Opie spun around and put Rat on the ground with a rocket right cross to his face. “Watch your fucking filthy mouth, Prospect,” he spat. He turned and stalked into the clubhouse. The rest of the Sons followed after him, ignoring Rat as he lay on the ground spitting blood.

Chapter 8

It took Lilli constant effort to concentrate on her classes that day. She loved her job (mostly), she loved her students (most of them), but the very last place she wanted to be at that moment was anywhere Opie wasn't. As soon as she got some actual, physical distance from him, their whole time together started to evanesce in her head. She'd felt attuned to him while he was with her.

But now, she worried that she'd manufactured that connection. Had she just made a monumental fool of herself? Had his part in her sudden sexual "reawakening" led her to see more between them than was actually there?

She felt exposed and out of control. She had built a life and a mindset for herself in which feeling exposed and out of control was all but impossible. No one had had any real power to affect her sense of well-being since Curt died. She'd had enough turmoil and trauma already. Besides, she'd worked hard to learn how to let life be what it was without freaking out about any of it.

How did she allow this to happen? She didn't *do* anxiety. Not anymore.

She wanted to make yesterday not happen. More than that, though, she wanted to get back to Opie and make it happen again.

She didn't even recognize herself.

When she focused on clearly remembering the specifics of the night and morning—what he said, what they did, how he was—she felt calmer. Unless she had completely fucking hallucinated the whole time (and then she had bigger problems) what she actually remembered about their time together was, well, magical. He had been quite clearly as invested in her as she was in him.

And, oh God, the sex. She'd always been enthusiastic and adventurous in bed, but even with Curt she hadn't had the blind intensity that she'd experienced with Opie. With anyone else, even Curt, she had had silky, romantic sex or raunchy, rowdy sex. With Opie it was both all at once, and a lot more—they had laid themselves wide open to each other.

Okay. She felt better when she played everything back through. In fact, she felt really damn good—too good to be sitting in a faculty meeting, that's for sure. When she had to teach, though, and actively think about something else, then Opie receded into fantasy, and the panic rose. She needed to get through the day and back to him.

She was *really* not happy with herself for all this mental fluttering. It was not like her. It was weak-ass, was what it was. The thought of sitting around waiting for a man made her furious and sick. She would absolutely not allow herself to indulge in such bullshit behavior. So, after her last class ended that evening, instead of running home to wait by the door for him, she decided to see if Scott was around. A couple of hours of hard workout always got her sorted out. She drove back to Charming.

Parking on Oak Street, she got her bag out of the trunk and headed into the gym. As she was walking back to the locker room, she saw Scott on the floor, working at the free weights with a heavy-set guy she hadn't seen before. She waved and walked up.

"How you doin', Lilli?"

"Good, Scott. You maybe want to spar tonight?"

"Um, sure. Tom here is my last client, so—how 'bout in an hour?"

"Great. I'll get a circuit in beforehand. Thanks," she said and went to change.

She spent the circuit thinking about Opie. By the time an hour had passed, when Scott waved her over to the ring, she was good and warm and had sorted out most of her anxiety and self-loathing—all the therapy she needed. Spending the next 45 minutes or so doing krav maga and giving Scott a friendly ass-kicking was just recreation. Afterwards, she showered and headed home, feeling strong, refreshed and pleasantly weary.

*

It was nearly 10 when she got home. She wasn't sure what Opie had meant by "late," but she had an idea he meant something later than a pensioner's bedtime. She cleaned the kitchen—she hadn't had to wash so many dishes in years—and changed the bedding. Her room had reeked of sex, and though she first spent several minutes just enjoying the sense memories, the bed was seriously trashed and, really, a little gross. So she put on fresh linens and generally fluffed the room. Then she changed into a clean tank and pajama bottoms and went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. No work tonight. She turned on the front porch light and a lamp near the living room couch, then curled up on the couch with her wine and one of the novels she was reading for pleasure.

Just after 2am, she heard his bike pull into the driveway. She'd had a couple of glasses of wine and had been dozing comfortably against the side of the couch. She stood up, stretched, and went out to the porch just as he was coming up her walk. He was dressed as usual, in jeans and his kutte, but tonight he was wearing a dark beanie over his tawny locks. She saw in the glint of the porch light that he was wearing big rings on both hands. That, too, was new—to her, anyway.

He looked exhausted and serious at first, but when he saw her he smiled. "Hi, babe."

Why didn't it bug her that he called her "babe?" She had had many a pointed argument over the years about patriarchal subjugation and the infantilizing of women implied by such an "endearment." It had *always* been a fighting word for her. But when Opie called her "babe," she got all flippy in the stomach. She loved it.

He stepped up on the porch and pulled her into his arms. He leaned down and just held her, his forehead on her shoulder. He smelled of gasoline and smoke. And gunpowder. *Okay. Not teddy*

bear tea parties. She looped her arms around his neck and nestled her face against his cheek. “Hey. You okay?”

He answered her without lifting his head. “I am now. It wasn’t a great night. Or day, actually. I just wanted to be here.”

“I spent the whole day hoping I hadn’t gone nuts and made myself an imaginary biker, so I’m very glad to have you here.” He chuckled and squeezed her harder.

“Come inside. I’ll make you a drink. You want something to eat? I can call Gina’s—they deliver all night.”

“No, I’m good. A drink would be nice, though.” He nuzzled her neck and took a deep breath.

“God, I love the way you smell.” Her stomach did the flippy thing again.

She turned her head and kissed his cheek. “Let’s go in.” She took his hand and led him through the door and to the couch, then gently pushed him to sit. “What do you want—beer, wine, whiskey? Tequila?”

“Whiskey would be great. Just straight.” He laid his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. She poured them both about three fingers of whiskey and went back to the living room. She sat next to him, one leg folded under, and handed him his glass when he looked up. He stared at it for a long time, then tossed it back in one swallow and set the glass on the low table in front of them.

He was putting off a heavy vibe. Worry, anger, fear—she couldn’t quite read it, but he was definitely upset and distracted. He hadn’t told her much about the club, but she knew enough to know that what had happened tonight had probably been intense and on the dark side. She wasn’t sure what to ask or how to act just now. So, as was her wont, she followed her gut. She finished her own drink and set her glass down.

“Opie. I don’t know what you want to tell me about things like tonight, or what you *can* tell me. I don’t expect you to feel like you can tell me everything. I don’t want you to think you have to tell me anything. I don’t want you to feel like you have to lie or evade. So I’m not going to ask any questions, at least not yet, not tonight. I hope there will come a time when you want to tell me whatever would help you to deal with the things you have to deal with. There might come a time when I will need some answers. But right now, I just want you to feel some peace here with me.”

He was completely still, his eyes intent on hers. Then he slid a hand under her hair and around the back of her neck and pulled her to him for a deep, desperate kiss.

After a minute or two, she moved to straddle him, but he held her back. “Lilli, I—would it be okay if I took a shower?”

It sounded like a request, not an invitation, and that was okay. “Absolutely. Come on, I’ll let you use my fluffiest towel.” She pulled him up and led him down the hall.

She got him set up in the bathroom and left him alone. She went to turn off the porch light and collect the empty glasses from the living room. On her way to the kitchen, she saw that he’d left the bathroom door open. She took the glasses to the sink and turned back to watch him strip (she felt a little down-low clench as he pulled off his beanie and his long hair fell loose) and step into the shower. For several minutes, he just stood under the stream of hot water with his back to her, his hands against the wall and his head down. In that position, with the muscles of his back and shoulders bunched and his legs spread, he looked especially big and powerful and seemed to fill her extra large shower. *Damn.*

She marveled at the tattoo that covered his entire back and exactly replicated the patch on his kutte. He was literally marked for life. Was she really signing on to a life where her man came home smelling of fire and gunpowder?

Yes, she was. She had.

She walked to the bathroom door and leaned on the jamb. “Hey. You want company?”

He looked over his shoulder, then turned to face her and leaned back against the wall. His expression was flat. His cock was hard. She took off her pajamas and stepped in.

He pulled her with him under the showerhead. When she tipped her head back to let her hair soak, he pressed his bearded face against her neck and bit her—not enough to break the skin, but not gently, either. She flinched and gasped, but instead of easing off, he sucked hard on the same spot. He pulled up then, and grabbed her face between his ringed hands. With a ferocity that was new and that frightened and thrilled her in equal measure, he pushed his mouth against hers and forced her to take his tongue. He pushed her hard against the shower wall and pressed against her. With his knee, he knocked her legs apart. He pushed his cock between her legs, sliding it against her core. He was still kissing her, his mouth demanding.

She was sure she could extricate herself if she wanted or needed to, so she was more worried about *why* he was being so rough. She didn’t know him enough to know what this was. She was on guard; she was also completely turned on. The whole thing was freaking her out. She pushed against his face until she succeeded in getting him to take his mouth from hers and let her fucking breathe. “Opie!”

He went still and looked at her, panting hard. In his eyes, she saw passion and pain and desperation—and something like regret, too—and suddenly she understood what was happening, what he needed. Okay. Rough sex she could do. Enthusiastically—she liked her pleasure pretty close to pain. Just as long as everyone was on the same page. She brushed his wet hair out of his eyes and studied him. Then she put her hands on his shoulders and pull-pushed herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist. He grabbed her ass to hold her, but he otherwise didn’t move. She wasn’t sure he’d even blinked since she’d stopped him. She leaned down and kissed him. “Go for it, love.” Then she bit down on his lower lip.

He grunted and moved a hand around to position himself. Then he shoved in hard and fast, pinning her to the wall. She cried out. He pressed his face into the crook of her shoulder and pounded into her until she came, screaming. He held her against the wall, his breathing loud and harsh, his face still pressed to her neck and his cock hard inside her, while she spasmed.

Suddenly he pulled out of her, dropped her to the ground and spun her around. He pushed her shoulders down until she was almost doubled over and had to balance herself with her hands against the wall. He grabbed her ass in both hands and took her from behind, slamming against her, his hands wrapped around her hips and his fingers grasping her hard. She grunted. It hurt. He was too big to be this rough; she was going to have to stop him. It was too much . . . and then it wasn't too much at all. Then it was incredible. She began matching his thrusts with her own. This time when she came he joined her with an earthy roar.

While they were still connected, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her upright. She leaned back against him, her head resting on his chest. He kissed her head. They stood in that position, with the hot stream from the shower hitting Opie's back and spraying around him, until their breathing returned to normal. She felt a sting when he pulled out of her, and she hissed in a breath. He froze. "God, Lilli. I hurt you. Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I'm fine, Opie. It's okay. I liked it. Maybe you noticed." She turned and linked her hands around his neck. "I'm not saying that I'm always going to be ready to be your anger management therapy, but I like rough sex just fine, as long as everybody's on board. You didn't do anything I wasn't okay with. I wouldn't have let you."

He didn't look any less guilty, but he nodded and kissed her gently. "Okay."

"I would like to take a second here and actually use some soap before we get out, though." She picked up the soap.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

She absolutely did not. "I absolutely do not." She lathered up her hands and soaped his chest.

They washed each other with chaste tenderness; Opie was particularly gentle and attentive. When they were done and dry, Lilli led him to her room, leaving their clothes where they lay on the bathroom floor. She put him into bed and slid in next to him, curled up under the fresh linens in the warm curve of his body. He slid one arm under her head and pulled her close with the other. "I love you," he whispered.

They'd known each other fewer than three days. It was crazy fast, but she believed it to be true. She believed because it was true for her as well. She closed her eyes and thought of Curt, and Dougie, and of the empty spot at the top of her back. She laced her fingers into his and kissed his hand. "I love you."

For the second night, they fell asleep together nested like spoons.

PART TWO: WINTER

Chapter 9

Lilli pulled a couple of boxes out of her trunk, stacked them, and headed into the clubhouse. She noted that the usual line of parked bikes was pretty sparse this morning. She found Phil, Ratso, and Bobby hanging around at the bar. Bobby saw her first and smiled broadly. “Hey, beautiful.”

Rat and Phil jumped off their barstools. Rat, who was always a little skittish around her for some reason, looked down and said, “Hello, ma’am.”

“Hey, guys. Could I get some help getting stuff out of my car? Thanks.”

The Prospects headed off to do her bidding. Bobby came around the bar and took the boxes from her. “So what’s all this?”

“Just decorations and stuff that Gemma asked me to bring for the Christmas party tonight. Also maybe some surprises for all my good little bad boys.” She winked, and Bobby blew her a kiss.

The guys came in with the rest of the boxes and stood in the middle of the room. Bobby nodded his head toward the bar. “We’ll stack them back there until you ladies are ready to decorate.”

“Thanks, Bobby. You’re my hero. Especially for taking care of Opie’s present—*very sneaky*. You’re like a biker ninja. A Jewish Elvis biker ninja.”

He laughed and said in his Elvis voice, “Thank you very much.”

“Hey—speaking of Opie, I saw he and the rest of the guys are out. You expect them back soon?”

“Couple hours, maybe. You gonna hang out with us and wait? Class up the joint?”

“Nothing could class up this joint, Bob. Where class is concerned, this joint is a totally lost cause. They will someday write songs about the moral and cultural ruin that is this joint. And no, I’ve got to get some errands done. I was just hoping to get a little sugar first.”

Bobby laughed and shook his head. “I’ll be sure to tell him what he missed, then.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “You do that. I’ll see you later.” She headed out to her car.

*

The three months that she and Opie had been a couple had been intense and scary and fantastic. They had encountered some snags, but their bond, and the love they’d expressed so early, had only deepened. And through Opie, she had discovered people she actually enjoyed: the Sons. They were a testosterone-overloaded bunch—rough, weird, violent, and casually sexist as hell. But they were forthright. They were funny. They were fiercely, fiercely loyal. In who and what they were, they were pure. And, though she’d had to get used to being known as Opie’s “old lady”

and being called the entire lexicon of gendered endearments like “doll” and “honey,” these men treated her with a care and real respect that she hadn’t experienced from any other men besides Curt and her dad—including all the supposedly “enlightened” academic men she knew, none of whom ever called her “doll.”

What she needed and wanted and what Opie (and by extension the MC) needed and wanted in their relationship was sometimes at odds, though. The idea that the MC even had a stake in what was needed and wanted in their relationship, for example—that was a hard one for her to get straight with. She came—grudgingly—to recognize that they had some valid reasons for their interest. But it chafed.

It had taken some doing to get Opie to understand that she wouldn’t tolerate a watchdog. Or ten. The first couple of times she didn’t pick up his call, or call right back, had sent him into frantic search mode. That would not do. She understood why he was worried. He felt he had failed to keep Donna safe, and he didn’t want something to happen to her because he wasn’t paying attention. But Lilli needed to have her independent thing. She did not check in—with anyone. She would not allow him to keep tabs on her. She knew her stubbornness on this point made him crazy. It was the only thing they really fought about.

They’d pretty much managed to work it out, though. Opie had calmed down about her safety—or, at least, he’d gotten control of his instant worry reflex. She made every effort to keep her phone near when she could. She had come to love the Sons and think of them as family. Piney especially—his gruff sweetness reminded her of her own dad, and he had quickly begun to treat her like a daughter.

Lilli even liked Clay, the club President, okay. Opie was guarded with him but absolutely would not entertain any questions from Lilli about it, so she proceeded on the evidence she had at her disposal. He was nice to her, so she was nice to him.

The women were a somewhat different story. Most of the women were . . . well, they were groupies. The guys called them “Crow Eaters.” It was offensive, but it was also, sadly, apt. Some of the women were strong and righteous, but others really were just groupies, and Lilli lamented that they seemed to have more self-regard than self-respect. There was some jealousy, too, toward the women who’d attained the coveted position of old lady. Because she was an old lady, they gave her room and respect, whether they liked her or not. Lilli understood the power dynamics involved, but the ambivalent attitude of envy and respect that most of the women had toward her made her uncomfortable. She liked it much better when the Crow Eaters weren’t around. And that made her feel a little guilty.

There were only two other women acknowledged as old ladies, and they all three wielded power in the clubhouse, even over the men. The MC gender dynamics were fascinating to her academic self. She was still sometimes surprised that she’d placed herself in the midst of them.

She thought she might actually have found a real friend in Jax’s old lady, Tara, who was as little like the other “biker chicks” as she was. Gemma, who was Jax’s mom and Clay’s wife. . . well, they got along okay. Lilli had a deep respect for her ferocity, but she was the one person in the

club whom Lilli trusted not at all. The woman was always sure her way was right, and Lilli got the strong sense that she would do *anything* to get her way.

There was still not much she knew about what the Sons did away from the clubhouse. Opie was reluctant to tell her anything that could draw her into the risk any more than simply being with him had already done, and Lilli wasn't going to push him to tell her more than he was ready to tell her. And, honestly, she was okay with not confirming the things she suspected. When after one rough night he'd explained the "Men of Mayhem" patch he wore on his kutte, she felt like she had a sufficiently general sense about the things that went down when the club was earning. That he'd killed didn't change how she felt about him or the life they were making—it didn't even surprise her—but she didn't feel the need to cement any particular image that could feed the anxiety she already felt when he was away with SAMCRO.

So they had settled into a rhythm. They were completely in sync when they were together, but their lives apart were, well, apart. They didn't much talk about any of it. They neither of them were all that chatty just by nature. It wasn't that they wouldn't or couldn't communicate. They'd just tacitly decided that there were some things that weren't worth talking about.

Sometimes he came in bruised, bloody, and battered. The desperate, rough, "therapy" sex happened every now and then, and she'd figured out that those times corresponded with times of intense mayhem with the Sons. She tended to him the way he needed her, and she felt closer to him for it. But Opie was a gentle soul, and such nights were infrequent. Any roughness was usually just entirely recreational—and her idea. Most often, though, they were just *with* each other, and life seemed unusual only in the intensity of their pleasure together.

Her independent life was nothing like his, but still Opie didn't ask much about her days on campus or what else she did when she was away from him, and she'd never told him about most of the different kinds of physical training she did virtually every day. He knew she worked out a lot. He knew she practiced yoga. He hadn't expressed curiosity, so she just didn't say anything. She was sure he had an idea in his head about aerobics or Zumba or some such thing. That was dandy with her.

At first, she thought a lot about telling him, and then she just didn't think about it anymore. In reality, she was a brown belt in krav maga and an expert marksman with pistol, rifle and bow. She'd been the only child of a career soldier, a damn Green Beret. He'd put a weapon in her hand before she could ride a two-wheeler. She could hold her own pretty fucking well.

Truthfully, she liked that Opie didn't know. There was no reason to keep it a secret except that, after years of living a completely private life, it was one of the few things that was still only hers. And, anyway, he did know about the bow, because one of the surprises of her secret garden was a small archery range. He'd been suitably impressed (he'd been totally turned on by it and they'd fucked in the grass right there), but her longbow was probably not going to save her from the kinds of shit Opie imagined when he was worried about her.

They each had their mysteries, and they each respected and appreciated the room for that. It worked.

*

When Lilli got back to the clubhouse that afternoon, the guys were apparently still away—and now Bobby’s bike was gone, too. Tara, Gemma, and the Prospects were at work on decorations. The place was spotless (and she wasn’t sorry to have missed the scrubbing portion of the agenda). The pool table was covered and prepped to serve as a massive buffet table. The couches and easy chairs had been pulled along the walls, and a dozen or so card tables, each with four folding chairs, were arranged around the room and dressed for dinner. Lilli was amazed by the transformation; the clubhouse was usually a pit.

Rat and Phil were struggling to get a huge fir straight in its stand, Gemma was on a ladder stringing lights near the ceiling, and Tara was sorting ornaments. Lilli smelled turkey; the birds were well underway. She hadn’t had a Christmas like this in years. In point of fact, she’d *never* had a Christmas quite like this. Norman Rockwell in leather and ink.

Gemma saw her first. “Hi, Lilli—can you give me a hand here, baby?”

Lilli put her messenger bag and her gym bag behind the bar and took off her leather jacket. “Sure, Gemma.” She grabbed the wad of lights Gemma handed her and began untangling it and feeding the strand up to her. “You guys have made a lot of progress. Everything is looking great. Hey, Tara—where are the boys?” She loved those beautiful boys and had taken to the role of favored aunt with relish. It was her one real tension with Gemma, who didn’t like any competition—including Tara, their mom—for the boys’ affection. Abel was about as old as Dougie ever got, and Thomas still had that amazing baby smell, and sometimes when she was with them she almost felt like time had reversed.

“Jax and Ope took them Christmas shopping, if you can believe that.” The little coil in the pit of her stomach that was always there when Opie was out with the Sons released at the information. The mall on Christmas Eve had its own dangers, but they didn’t usually result in blood and fire. Then again, if they did, a Son would probably be involved.

Rat and Phil eventually got the tree straight and stable, and the lights got strung around the room and around the tree. The women took turns checking on the kitchen goings-on while they trimmed the tree. At some point, someone had put Christmas carols on the stereo and everyone was singing. Everything looked, and everyone felt, festive and downright Christmasy. Lilli marveled.

People were beginning to trickle in, including the Sons. Gemma put Chibs, Juice, and Tig to work on getting the storage boxes out of sight. She and Tara were in the kitchen, and three cooks were really too much for that space (especially when one of the cooks was Gemma), so Lilli took the opportunity, grabbed her stuff from the bar, and went back to the apartment, where Opie’d been living as long as she’d known him.

It was a dump, though she thought he’d been making a little bit of effort at least to have clean sheets since she’d spent a few nights there. Today, the bed was even made. It was still a dump.

But it was private, and Lilli needed to change. She wanted a magical first Christmas together, and she planned to have Opie seriously bewitched.

She knew exactly how to get him riled up. She unpacked her bag and started to change. Black leather ankle-strap pumps. Black seamed stockings. Black garter belt and thong. Black leather mini-skirt—not so short it showed the garters (that was for Opie, later), but short enough to show leg. Garnet-red fitted knit top—snug long sleeves, jewel neckline in front, basically backless (so no bra). She brushed out her hair and pulled into a high ponytail, wrapping a lock of hair around the band and pulling the ponytail over her shoulder. She rarely wore much jewelry, but tonight she put her mother’s diamond studs in her ears. A little makeup (another thing she didn’t wear much). Ta. Da. Top to bottom, this was a look Opie had never seen on her. She hadn’t seen something like it on herself in years. It was working.

As she was walking down the hall to the main room, she heard Abel babbling about Santa—they were back. She walked through the doorway and saw Jax with Tara and the boys. Opie was . . . over at the bar, having a drink with Chibs, Tig, Bobby, and Juice. As she walked up, he saw her and smiled his usual, relieved-and-happy smile, but it froze after a second. She could almost hear his brain whirr as he processed her look. Eying her legs. Check. Noting the lack of bra. Check. Realizing how the neckline of her top just grazed her collarbone. Check. She walked up close, facing him, and kissed his cheek. “Hey you. I missed you,” she whispered in his ear.

“Christ, Lilli. You look amazing.”

“Thanks. Merry Christmas, Opie.”

He smiled. “Merry Christmas, babe.” Then, as he was lifting his glass for a swallow, he looked past her with a strangely aggressive expression. She turned and finally noticed that the rest of the guys at the bar were gaping at her like a pack of dumb dogs. And then she heard Opie choking on tequila. He was seeing her bare back—the bare back she’d inadvertently first presented to the guys. It was more or less the result she’d been going for, though it wasn’t the scenario she’d planned. She turned back to Opie, smiling sheepishly.

“Um . . . you like?”

He was still coughing—tequila burned—but he managed a smile. When he’d recovered enough to speak, he said, “I *love*. I’m not thrilled with these assholes—” he gave the group a pointed stare, and she heard throat-clearing behind her—“but that’s their problem, not yours. You look beautiful. You *are* beautiful.” He put his hand on her bare back and brought her close for a very private kiss.

Just then, Gemma called her for help in the kitchen. Lilli gave Opie a quick squeeze and headed to the kitchen. After a couple of steps, she heard several different throats clear again, and Opie muttering, “oh, holy shit.” They’d seen the seams on her stockings. She smirked and walked on without turning back.

Gemma gave her a sharp, appraising look when she walked into the kitchen. “Well, Lilli baby, you sure know how to work him.”

Lilli was feeling too happy tonight to find offense with Gemma, so she just laughed and said, “You gotta know your man, right?”

Gemma huffed a laugh, shook her head, smiled, and said, “Right on.” Tara came in then and the three of them, with help from the Crow Eaters, laid a bountiful table for their family.

*

With the possible exception of Dougie’s second Christmas, when he was old enough to really get excited about the whole deal, this was her favorite ever. She couldn’t believe she’d spent Christmas Eve in a such happy, boisterous, bacchanalian celebration. Dinner had been delicious—it should have been; the three of them had planned and baked and cooked for days—and everyone had been civilized. Piney distributed presents, actually wearing a Santa hat. Lilli, who had inherited from both father and husband and lived simply, and was thus never-need-to-work loaded (though Opie wanted her to keep that fact quiet and away from the Sons), couldn’t resist a splurge, and had had custom 1:12 scale models made for each Son of his principal bike, including his custom tank art. Each bike was fixed on a stand with the Son’s name engraved on it. They had gone over extremely well, but she thought Opie had gotten his fill of the enthusiastic hugs and kisses she’d gotten in thanks.

She’d never had so many people to buy presents for, and she’d had a great time figuring out interesting, one-of-a-kind gifts for each person. For Piney, in addition to his model, she’d had a leather-bound copy made of her dad’s war journal. They’d served at the same time, and Piney had expressed a lot of interest in what Lilli knew about her dad’s experience. For Tara, she’d found a pediatric medicine textbook from the 19th century at a rare book store. She’d gotten Jax an antique flask. She found a fabulous vintage silver cuff bracelet for Gemma. And she’d gone a little nuts on gifts for Abel and Thomas.

She and Opie had decided to exchange presents on Christmas morning, alone at home. The experience of buying the gifts had touched Lilli deeply, and she was gratified to see that her recipients seemed to be equally touched. She’d done it all entirely independent of Opie. Several times while presents were opened, she caught him giving her a thoughtful look and, when Piney opened the war journal last of all, Opie walked up behind her and wrapped her tightly in his arms. “Ah, babe. That’s fantastic.”

She didn’t care about presents for herself, but she amassed a tall stack of books. (What do you get a professor? Books. Which is actually the correct answer.) A lot of the books were the fancy-schmancy leather-and-gilt variety that non-bookish-types tended to favor for gift giving, but she also got some very choice titles, and even a couple of excellent first editions from Jax and Tara. She thought perhaps a tall, tawny biker might have been skulking through her collection and feeding out hints. She got some pretty pieces of jewelry, too. She had felt pleasantly overwhelmed.

Shortly after presents, the kids and extended-family types went home, and the bacchanal started with a vengeance. The music got loud, the Crow Eaters got drunk, and the Sons got blown. By midnight, someone had crashed drunkenly into the tree and knocked it to the ground. That's about when Opie pulled Lilli aside and into his arms. He gently pulled the band out of her hair and ran his fingers through it. He'd been drinking but wasn't drunk. "I can't take much more, babe. I've been thinking about pulling those stockings down with my teeth all night. Let's go to my room."

Um, no. She had something else in mind. She grabbed his beard. "Ick. Let's go home instead." They didn't live together exactly, but they spent most nights at her place, and they'd both taken to calling it "home" pretty quickly. Opie's only other home was the clubhouse; he had sold the house he'd bought with Donna and put the money in trust for his kids.

"You're not getting on my bike dressed like that."

This was all part of her plan. "Let's take my car, then. You can drive, and we can come back for your bike tomorrow." She knew he hated to be without his bike, so she leaned in and pressed her leg against his crotch. He groaned. She took his hand and slid it under her skirt, just enough so that he could feel the garters. He moaned. She slid her hands into his hair and pulled his head down alongside hers. His breath hitched. She circled her tongue around his ear and bit the lobe. He clutched her to him, his hands flat on her bare back. She whispered, "I promise you won't regret it."

"Let's go. Now."

Someone who always kept her promises, she blew him on the ride.

*

Opie pulled down to the end of the driveway and Lilli got out to open the garage door. She was hope-hope-hoping that Bobby had set things up the way they'd planned. She hadn't been home since morning. She pulled up the door and (*yay!*) there, illuminated by the 'Cuda's headlights and standing in the middle of the garage, refreshed and refitted, polished to a gleaming luster, and topped with a big black, orange, and white bow (*well done Bobby!*), was the shovelhead. She heard the 'Cuda's engine cut and Opie get out.

"Lilli, what—?"

"I love you, Opie. Merry Christmas."

He said nothing for a minute. She went to stand next to him. Then he started, "Lilli, this is too—I can't—"

She cut him off. "Dude, if you're about to refuse this gift, I will kick your ass all the way to St. Patrick's Day."

He laughed and held his hands up. “Okay, okay.” He got serious again. “But I need to know something. I know what this bike is. I know what it means to you. Are you absolutely, absolutely sure this is what you want to do?”

She moved to stand in front of him and held his face in her hands. “Opie. I love you. I’m surprised every day by how much. Being with you has changed my life—has changed *me*—in ways I don’t think you realize, in ways I don’t think even I fully realize. I have a life and a heart that is fuller than it ever was. I have a family in a way I *never* had.” She’d practiced that part. But, dammit, crying wasn’t part of the plan.

“I loved Curt. A part of me that I keep close in memory will always love him. I will always miss the little family we made with Dougie. Losing them emptied me out. But you, Opie, you fill me up.

She sniffed and composed herself, wiping the tears away. “Curt would have liked you. And he would have hated the bike to rot, but he would have hated more the idea of some random schmo taking it away. If he were making the choice right now, you’d be his choice.

“In conclusion: take the fucking bike, asshole.”

He laughed out loud, lifted her off her feet to bring her face to his, and kissed her. “It’s incredible, babe. Thank you. Thank you so much. I love you.” He kissed her again. “How did you manage this? This is why you kept putting me off when I wanted to work on it?”

“Yep. Bobby helped me—well, he basically did everything.” She grinned. “You should watch out for him. He’s very sneaky.”

He set her back down and went to look at his new bike. Lilli walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist. “You wanna take a ride?”

He turned in her embrace and put his hands on her hips. “You’re still not getting on my bike dressed like that. You’ll need to change.” He leaned down to nuzzle her neck. “I could help you with that. With my teeth.”

She squealed as he swung her up into his arms and carried her into the house.

When they got into the hallway, he put her down, then pushed her up against the wall and kissed her hard. His erection pressed against her, and she pressed back and shimmied her hips. He growled and kissed her harder.

His hands moved all over her body, pushing up her shirt to bare her breasts, caressing and tweaking her nipples, sliding down her sides then up her thighs to bring the skirt up over her ass, and then sliding back down to the tabs on her garter belt. Her every nerve was screaming.

He ran his fingers under the tabs. “Jesus Christ, these are so damn hot.” He started to go to his knees, but she stopped him.

“Here, let me help you out.” Lilli reached down with both hands and released the ties holding her thong together. She pulled it out and held it up, dangling it in front of her. “Leave the stockings. Teeth later. Right now, right here, just fuck me. Please.”

“God yes.” He unbuttoned his jeans and released his cock. He pushed her legs apart and shoved into her with a grunt. She was just tall enough in her high heels for deep penetration, but he grabbed one of her knees and held it up against his hip and got even deeper. He thrust into her with abandon, over and over.

She felt her orgasm coming up fast and clutched at his head. “FUCK YES!” He kept pounding, and her orgasm kept going, until he suddenly pushed into her as far as he could and arched backwards with a howl.

As they came down, they kissed slowly and deeply. Opie put her leg down and leaned into her, pushing her against the wall, his softening cock still deep inside her. He pressed his lips to her temple. “Oh, God, Lilli, I love you,” he murmured. She threaded her fingers through his hair and held him closer. After a moment, he slipped out of her and bent his knees. He lifted her feet off the ground and carried her into the bedroom.

He stood her at the foot of the bed and gently rearranged her top and skirt. Then he eased her down to sit on the bed. He buttoned all but the top button of his fly. Then—*oh my God oh my God*—he got onto one knee on the floor at her feet. Lilli’s heart raced as he reached into his pocket. He pulled out—yes, a ring. A beautiful oval amethyst set in delicately worked white gold. It looked old-fashioned. *God*. When Opie started talking, she didn’t interrupt.

“This was my grandma’s. She and my granddad were happily married for 63 years, until the day he died. I always thought this ring was pretty, and it’s one of a kind. The stone is an amethyst, too, which was her birthstone, and it’s yours, too. So it just seemed like the right ring. But if you say yes and want a different ring, you can pick out whatever you want.

“Lilli, what you said tonight in the garage is exactly how I feel, too. I’ve been feeling guilty for loving you the way I do, because I never loved Donna like this. I loved her so much, and I spent two years missing her every day, but I don’t think she ever understood me, and she never accepted the life I brought with me. She loved me, I know she did, but I disappointed her every day. You don’t make me feel that way. You give me room. You bring me peace. I know I’m asking too much when I ask you to join your life with mine. But I want to spend the rest of my life in the peace I feel with you.”

“Lilli, will you marry me?”

Chapter 10

“Lilli, will you marry me?”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Opie felt lightheaded. She was crying. Was that good?

“Opie. It’s beautiful. That’s the perfect, perfect ring. I will wear it and cherish it for the rest of my life.”

That sounded like a yes, but . . . “I’m feeling a little stupid right now, babe, so it would really help if you would answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

She laughed. “Yes. *Yes.*”

He slid the ring on her finger. Then he climbed onto the bed and made love to her. After he took her stockings off with his teeth.

*

Opie’s phone went off a few hours later. He woke up and jumped to grab it out of the pocket of his discarded jeans before it could wake Lilli. He looked at the time. 4:47am. It was Chibs. Lilli stirred but did not fully wake. He answered the phone.

“Yeah, Chibs.”

“We’re at the table in 30 minutes, brutha.”

“Shit.”

“Aye.”

“Okay.” He hung up and pulled on his jeans. Sons didn’t ask for details, not over the phone. A call before 5 on Christmas morning was fucking bad news. That’s the only detail he needed. He looked at Lilli, sleeping sweetly, her dark hair tousled over her face. Her left hand, wearing the ring he’d just given her, rested on the pillow he’d been lying on. A lump grew in his throat. He knelt down at the side of the bed and brushed her hair back. “Lilli, babe. I need you to wake up.”

She hummed and moved toward him. He kissed her lightly on the lips. “Lilli, wake up, babe.”

She opened her eyes. In a second, awareness came on her, and she wrinkled her brow and sat up. She was naked and gorgeous, and, fuck, he was worried. “I got a call. I have to get to the clubhouse right now.”

“Opie, my God. It’s Christmas morning. This has to be bad.”

“Yeah, it does.”

He saw the worry darken her lovely grey eyes. But what she said was, “Okay. You going to take the shovelhead?”

Not a single complaint. Not a word of challenge. He could not have loved her more or been more grateful in that moment. She was a true old lady. “No. I want my first ride on it to be with you. Would you drive me back to the club?”

She slid off the bed and wound her arms around him. They held each other for a few seconds, then she went to her closet to get dressed.

*

She pulled into the lot but didn't park. Opie tried again. “I wish you would change your mind. Stay here at the clubhouse at least until I know what's going on. I need you safe. Please, Lilli.”

She sighed, and in that exhale of breath he could hear that she was tipping past frustration into anger. “Opie, that is not the deal. You know I don't hide. *I don't hide*. I won't live in a bunker.”

He was getting angry as well, and he hit the dashboard hard with the side of his fist. “*I'm not asking you to live in a bunker!* I'm asking you to hang out someplace I know you're safe while there's a danger!”

She stared at the place on the dash he'd struck before turning back to him, her jaw rigid and her eyes narrow. She didn't yell—he'd never heard her actually yell—but she hit her words hard. “There's *always* a fucking danger, Opie. You told me yourself: the violence follows you *everywhere*. Okay. I signed on anyway, eyes open. It didn't deter me from loving you, from wanting to spend the rest of my life with you. It won't deter me from living that *fucking life the way I fucking want to*. Marrying you *cannot* change that. That's my end of a deal that has me watching you go away to *seek out* this shit—and *also* has me allowing a crew of fucking Neanderthals input into our personal business.”

He wanted to shake her. He himself was almost shaking with anger and anxiety. He had to—*had to*—keep her safe. It made him crazy to think of her unprotected. But he also knew that this was a fight he couldn't win. This was the trade-off for the way she took the news when he woke her. She gave him his room; he had to give her hers. She considered that non-negotiable. He closed his eyes to regroup. He took a long breath and exhaled slowly. “Okay. Okay. But Lilli, *please* keep your phone close today. And it would be great if you'd at least stay close to home.”

He felt her relax. She gave him a rueful smile. “It's Christmas Day. Where'm I gonna go?”

He leaned over and put his hands in her hair to pull her close. “I worry because I love you.”

“And I love you. *I* worry about *you*, you know. Every minute you’re away like this. But I don’t stop you from doing what you need to do.” She pressed her mouth to his.

He said, “I’ll call soon, okay?” As he got out, she caught and squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. He closed the door, and she pulled out of the lot and out of sight.

*

Opie called her in the afternoon, and her phone again rolled to voicemail. It was the third time he’d tried to call in the past hour, and he felt that the internal freakout he was having was completely legitimate. He’d talked to her earlier in the day, but now nothing. She hadn’t told him about any plans—and, as she’d said, it was Christmas Day, for God’s sake. If she wasn’t going to the compound—where Tara and the boys were, by the way—where else would she fucking be? And wherever she was, why wasn’t she answering her damn phone?

Happy’s house had burned to the ground in the middle of the night, with his grandmother, mother, sister, and nephews—his whole family, visiting for the holiday—sleeping inside it. All were dead. He was alive because he’d passed out in a Crow Eater at the party. They didn’t know yet whether it was a godawful freak accident, or some kind of extreme turf war volley, or whether it was wrapped up in this fucking cartel war, but unless it was an accident, they were targeting families. The place had been an inferno, which probably meant arson. The club had called in the families to the compound an hour ago. Lilli was the only outlier.

The Sons were scattered in small groups, securing the families, helping Happy, and trying to track down some kind of info on the fire. Opie had headed to Oakland with Jax and Chibs to see if Alvarez and the Mayans had any intel. Nothing had come from that excursion. Now they were headed back to Charming, and it was looking more like the usual suspects had nothing to do with this. Which left the cartel war—or some new player. Bad news either way, and he couldn’t get hold of Lilli. They’d pulled into a gas station so that Jax could check in with Tara at the clubhouse and Opie could try Lilli this third time. With no success.

Where was she?! He kept flashing to Donna, lying in the street. Then he’d see Lilli there. He saw her burned. He saw her beaten. His imagination was bludgeoning him with awful possibilities. It was all he could do not to lose his shit.

“Jax, I still can’t fucking reach her. I have to get to the house.”

“Yeah, man. Let’s move.”

*

When they got there, Opie first checked the garage—the ‘Cuda was there. Now he was feeling full-fledged panic—why wouldn’t she have picked up if she were home? “Her car’s here!” All three pulled guns and went on alert. *Where the fuck could she be?* The patio door wasn’t locked. This was bad. She wasn’t in the house. She wasn’t in the garden. Nothing was out of place, but

she wasn't here. He called again. Still no answer, but he hadn't heard it ring, so wherever she was she had her phone. He looked at his friend and let the panic show. "Jax . . ."

"No, Ope. No way. She's fine. Hold on." Jax dialed his phone. "Juice. Can you use the GPS in Lilli's phone to get her 20?" He looked at Opie and nodded. "Good. Call when you know." He hung up. "He said he can track it down in a few minutes. Then we'll know where she is."

"No. Then we'll know where her *phone* is." He punched the kitchen wall hard enough to make the dishes in the cabinets rattle. His rings gouged the plaster. He was going to hear about that. God, he hoped so.

"Easy, brutha," Chibs said, putting his hand on Opie's shoulder. He shrugged it off and punched the wall again, twice. He'd made quite a divot in the wall. This time, the pain in his fist shook him out of his fugue a little. He sighed and leaned against the counter, shaking his sore hand.

"I asked her to marry me last night. She said yes. I gave her my grandma's ring."

Jax and Chibs both clapped him on the back. Jax said, "Congratulations, bro. That's excellent."

Jax's phone rang then. "Yeah, Juice. Where? You sure? Okay—thanks, man." He hung up and looked at Opie. "You're not going to believe this. She's at Lumpy's."

That didn't even make sense. Her car was here. It was Christmas Day. But why would someone take her against her will to *Lumpy's*? Didn't matter. "Okay, then, that's where I'm headed."

Chibs headed to the door. "That's where we're all headed, Ope. No one's on their own today, so let's get your girl."

*

They parked on the street and strode into Lumpy's gym, Opie in the lead, hands on the grips of their guns, the "Open" sign swinging on the door as it closed behind them. In a low voice, Jax said, mainly to himself, "Right—Lumpy was Jewish. Christmas wasn't his thing." Lumpy had been killed almost two years ago, but his son was running the place now.

Opie heard Lilli grunt, and he pulled his gun and tore around the corner into the main part of the nearly-empty gym. And there she was. In the ring. She was sparring with a guy Opie didn't know. She was wearing a small pair of body-hugging black shorts and a black top that was little more than a bra. She was barefoot. Her hair was braided and coiled on the back of her head. The guy was shirtless and wearing bike shorts. They were too involved in their spar to notice the three Sons, guns drawn, standing about 12 feet away.

First, Opie was so relieved he felt woozy. He slid his gun into its holster. She was okay. *She was okay.*

Then, watching her fight, he was impressed. For a while, he stood there and watched her move as she kicked, punched, spun, leapt, ducked, rolled. She took some hits, but she evaded most, and she dealt more. She was kicking this guy's ass. He didn't know what she was doing exactly, but she was really good at it, whatever it was. She looked good doing it, too. Her skin glistened with sweat, and the muscles in her legs, arms, back, and abdomen—what she was wearing left a *lot* exposed—rippled gorgeously.

He heard Chibs behind him: “*Jesus*. I don't think we have to worry about her, brutha.”

He'd forgotten for a minute that Jax and Chibs were there with him, watching her. Then he was jealous. The guy came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her neck. She pulled him over her shoulder and to the ground, her fist in his face. Then she offered him her arm, and he took it and pulled himself up. There was way too much full-body contact going on between these two. He didn't care if she was kicking his ass.

Finally, a red fury overtook him. He had nearly gone mad with worry. He had been convinced she was dead or hurt. He'd been imagining horrific things. He had asked her to stay at the fucking clubhouse this morning. He'd asked her to stay home. He'd asked her keep her phone close. Instead, she was rolling around with some fucking anonymous asshole in fucking bike shorts. His hands rolled up into fists and clenched at his sides.

Just then, the guy put up his hand in a way that made Lilli step back. They were both panting hard. They did a fist bump and a quick hug. She turned around to slip between the ropes and out of the ring. She saw him when she turned, and she smiled. “Opie—hi! What are you doing here?”

She jumped to the floor, and he was on her before her smile could fade. He grabbed her and slammed her against the nearest wall. He heard her gasp as the impact knocked the breath out of her. He also vaguely heard Jax behind him warn, “Ope . . .”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw bike-shorts guy make a move toward him, but apparently the two armed Sons behind him dissuaded the asshole, who stopped in his tracks.

He held her against the wall by her arms. “What the holy fuck, Lilli! I've been calling you for *two hours*! I was fucking terrified! *You could have been hurt!*” He was yelling, his face inches from hers.

In her eyes, he saw his own fury doubled. Her voice was quiet but razor sharp. “Like now, you mean?” Opie faltered and froze. *Fuck*, what was he doing?

With two quick, fluid moves, she knocked his hands away and hit him so hard in the chest with the heel of her hand that he staggered back several steps, breathless. She stalked toward him. “Maybe you're confused, Opie. Maybe because I like it rough when we *fuck*—” she hit him in the chest again, this time with both hands but less force, to punctuate that word “—you're starting to think you can throw me around whenever you want.”

The guy piped up, “Lilli, do you need me to do anything here, or call anyone?”

Jax warned, “Bad idea, man.”

Without looking away from Opie, Lilli said, “No, Scott. You should go. Now. Jax, Chibs—you too. Get the fuck out.”

Jax said, “We’ll be out front.”

The three left, leaving Opie alone with her. She still hadn’t taken her eyes off him or softened her expression at all. He, on the other hand, had lost all his rage and was instead devouring himself with regret for coming at her like he had. “My God, I’m sorry, babe. Really sorry.” He reached a hand to her face. She knocked it away. He was starting to feel a whole new kind of panic.

“Keep your damn ‘sorry.’ I don’t want it. If you ever touch me like that without my consent again, we will be over. Well, truly, and forever over.” She put her hands on her hips and took a shaky breath. “I need you to get away from me now.”

Opie was scared and sorry and defeated. But he couldn’t give her what she needed. “I can’t, Lilli.” He couldn’t get out much more than a whisper.

She sighed, easing up a little. “Opie, we’re okay. I love you. Nothing’s really changed. But I am ferociously pissed at you, and I need you to give me some time to cool down.”

“I know. I know. But I can’t. I’m so sorry. But I need you to come back to the compound with me.”

She stared at him. “Jesus fucking Christ. Are you serious right now?”

He was. “I am.” He reached for her hand, and but she yanked it away. *Please God, don’t let me have ruined this.* “I know how bad I fucked up just now. Whether you want it or not, *I am so sorry.* You have to know that right now there’s *no way* I would push the point unless it was really important, so please just hear me out. Things are bad. We’ve called all the families into the compound. Happy’s house burned down last night with his whole family in it. They’re all dead.”

“Oh my God. Happy?”

“He was still at the party when it happened. We don’t know *what* happened yet, but it looks like it could be related to the club, and if so, someone might be targeting family members. Everyone is safest together right now. Please, please don’t fight me on this. Please, Lilli. I’m begging.”

“Okay.” She put her arms around him. He clutched her tightly. He tried not to cry.

*

Lilli told him that she’d gone for a run to burn off her own anxiety about *his* safety. She’d found the gym open and gone in on a whim, so she only had a jacket, her shoes, and her phone (for all

the good it had done them on vibrate) with her. With Jax and Chibs, Opie took her—on his bike, despite her very bare legs—back to the house to grab some clothes. She'd kept her hands on her own legs the whole the ride. When they got to the house, she threw a bag together. She insisted on taking her car to the compound, and Opie didn't have the spirit to fuss about it, so he and the guys followed her. There was a new distance between them that was killing him.

They'd been engaged less than a day.

The atmosphere in the clubhouse was social, despite the reason everyone was there. A lot of people were there—especially women and kids—and there was a lot to do, so the place was buzzing. But it was not boisterous.

Tara came up to Lilli, gave her a hug, and said something low in her ear. Lilli chuckled softly and nodded.

Bobby leaned over the bar and said low to Opie, "Clay wants us in the chapel as soon as he and Tig get back." Opie nodded.

Lilli nodded at someone across the room, and Opie saw Gemma.

Lilli called out, "What can I do?"

Gemma shook her head. "Nothing right now. We'll need to get food on soon, though."

Lilli looked at him. "I'm going to go back to your room. I need to take a shower and get actual clothes on." She walked past him, across the room, and down the hallway. It took Opie just about a minute to decide to follow her.

He opened the door to his room. She had taken her jacket and running shoes off and was unbraiding her hair. She looked up at him but didn't say anything.

"Babe. This whole day has been wrong. Can we take a minute and talk?"

She regarded him steadily for several seconds. Then she let out a long breath and sat down on the side of his bed.

He sat next to her, his leg pressed along hers. He took her left hand, the one wearing the ring he'd given her only hours before. She looked down at their linked fingers. He watched her beautiful face in profile as he spoke.

"You've never asked me what I do when I'm with the club, how I earn. It means a lot to me that you understand it's not something I want to talk about much—or even something I *can* always talk about. I know you're too smart not to have an idea. But I think the time for secrets between us is over. I think if you really knew SAMCRO, you might understand why I worry about you so much. I can never excuse how I treated you today, and I swear that I will cut my own throat before I ever do it again, but I would like to try to explain why I was so upset."

He paused. The next part was hard. “Maybe really knowing will be too much. Maybe knowing will be the end of us. If it means a chance to keep you safe, though, one way or another, I’ll take that risk.

“So I would like to tell you about SAMCRO. Then I’ll answer any questions you ask me. I trust you not to hurt the club. I know that they’re your family now, too. No matter what, I know you won’t hurt the club.”

He told her everything. He told her about the cartels, the drugs, the guns, the ATF, and the gangs and other MCs. He told her everything. He told her about the people he’d killed. He even told her about what really happened to Donna and why. He told her about Agent Stahl. He told her everything.

She never interrupted him, but she gradually moved to be closer to him, and by the time he was finished, they were lying on his bed, her head pillowed on his chest.

She asked him nothing. She leaned over his chest and met his eyes. She said only, “I’m sorry,” and kissed him. In that moment, the distance that had risen up between them receded. His heart swelled as the fear of losing her eased away, and he released a breath that was almost a sob.

He felt overpowered by his need of her. He cradled her face in his hands and deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue past her soft lips to search her mouth. He rolled and moved her under him, his chest on hers, her legs tangled with his. He pressed his mouth to her collarbone and pushed her top up, exposing her beautiful breasts. Lilli writhed and gasped under him as he moved to suckle one, then the other. She tasted sweat-salty and sweet. He felt her hands on his head, in his hair, holding him closer. He sucked hard on the nipple he had caught between his teeth, and she moaned and surged up against him. He slid his hand under the waistband of her little shorts and down between her legs.

She was hot and wet and thrusting against his hand even before he’d settled in. Still suckling her breast, he slid all four fingers into her and pushed the heel of his palm against her clit. He didn’t even need to move his hand; she was bucking and flexing so much already herself that he could feel her wet clit rubbing against him. He curled his fingers up slightly to rub against the extra-sensitive spot of her inner wall, and she cried out and bucked even harder, faster. Her fingers were tangled in his hair. She was panting and gasping. He knew she was close.

There was a knock at the door. They froze, though Lilli’s whole body continued to quiver. Opie released her breast and took a beat to compose himself. “Yeah.” He heard the impatience in his voice.

It was Juice, clearing his throat. “Sorry, Ope. Clay’s back. We’re at the table.”

Fuck. “Got it. Be right out.” He waited for a count of five and turned his attention back to the tense, shaking beauty in his arms. “Come for me, Lilli, before I go,” he whispered. He took her breast in his mouth again and began moving his hand hard, fast and deep. After barely a minute,

she cried out and surged up. He let her ride his hand, then pulled his fingers out of her and rubbed them in hard circles on her clit until she cried out again and slammed her legs together, capturing his hand between them to hold it still.

He held her close, pressing gentle kisses over her face until her spasms were over and she relaxed into his arms. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you, Lilli."

She was lying loose-limbed and still panting when he kissed her forehead and went out to the Sons.

Chapter 11

Opie went looking for Lilli as soon as he got back to the clubhouse. She wasn't in the main room. He checked the kitchen, where he found Gemma and Chuckie. "Hi, Gem."

"Hi, baby. Everything okay out there today?"

"Seems quiet, yeah. Have you seen Lilli?"

Gemma put her hands on her hips. "Don't worry, Ope. She's still here. I think she's back in your room. Working, she says. I thought she was on break. If you could see if she'd do some work out *here*, that would be great."

Opie laughed. "I'll see what I can do." He kissed her on the cheek.

Lilli was sitting sideways in the old armchair in the corner of his room, her legs draped over the side, her laptop on her stomach. There was a stack of tented books on the floor. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She was barefoot. She was wearing jeans and one of his shirts, with only enough buttons done to meet the least standard of propriety. He could see that she wasn't wearing a bra. She was, however, wearing her glasses. Opie thought this look—a pretty typical one for her, actually—was hands down her sexiest, and that was saying a *lot*.

She was typing steadily and completely immersed. He closed the door and walked over to her. She smiled without looking up as he went to his knees in front of the chair. He laid his head on her arm, and she tipped her head to rest it on his.

"Whatcha doin', babe?"

"Mmmm. Working on stuff for school. I'm missing some of the books I need, though."

"No problem. I can make another trip. Let me know which ones, and Jax and I will pick them up for you."

"That's great, Opie, but it's not going to work for much longer. It's been five days. I need to be able to work at my desk at home. I need *all* my books. Pretty soon I'm going to need to be able to go to campus. We have to figure out a plan soon that doesn't include me holing up in Hell's frat house forever."

Opie sighed. The fire at Happy's had been a Lobos Sonora attack. The cartel war had come to Charming. SAMCRO had always kept this shit out of town; now their involvement with the Galindo cartel had brought their town neck deep into the worst possible shit. It wasn't safe to be, or to be with, a Son in Charming right now, even though the Galindos were actively planning retaliation on SAMCRO's behalf.

Club retaliation was impossible; Romeo had asserted the cartel's prerogative—he called it their "responsibility"—for dealing with the doers. Happy, a particularly violent Son in any case,

wanted his own bloody vengeance and was furious to have had that right stripped from him. He and Clay had almost come to blows before he had left to take the bodies of his family home to be buried. But the cartel could crush the club with barely a ripple. If they said no, no it was. Opie could not believe the original charter of the Sons of Anarchy had become bitch to a Mexican drug cartel. This wasn't the SAMCRO he loved.

But it was still his club, and it was protecting its people now. Truth be told, he'd kind of enjoyed the lockdown, even with the constant threat. They'd all been together for days, and it had felt more like a family than it had in awhile. Clay, Jax, and he each had the luxury of private space, in deference to their old ladies. Everyone else was bunked together all through the clubhouse, and cots and bedrolls had to be brought out and put away daily. It was a Crow Eater buffet, basically, for the rest of the guys.

Lilli had settled in quickly, despite her resistance, and she'd been completely understanding since their talk on Christmas Day. He loved how comfortable she was in the clubhouse. None of it intimidated her. None of it shocked her. She took part in the ribbing and crude talk and didn't get her feelings bruised. She held her own with the whole rough bunch.

He'd thought when he met her that she was too classy to be part of his world. And she was the most beautiful, elegant woman he'd ever known. But she was also unaffected and accepting, so she took the Sons as they were and expected only the same in return. She loved them all, he knew. And they loved her. He could see it in the way they looked at her, the way they talked to and about her. He wouldn't be surprised if they were all a little *in* love with her. The thought didn't make him jealous; it made him content. She was his. He could share a little of her light with his brothers.

Besides, as elegant as she was, she had a helluva saucy streak. And he wouldn't be surprised if none of the Sons could take her in a fight. In addition to the martial arts thing he'd seen, which turned out to be krav maga, he'd also learned—and observed, when she went with the Sons to take target practice—that she was a deadeye with rifles and pistols. *Plus* the bow, which he'd already known about. He'd come to find out that his old lady was a serious badass. None of that would likely be enough if Lobo really went after her, but it was sexy as all get out.

“Okay, babe. I'll take it to the guys. It's been quiet since Christmas, so maybe it's time to break up the party.”

“You do know that when I need to go, I'm not going to care whether you boys vote on it or not, right?”

He grinned and kissed her. “Oh yeah. I got that message loud and clear.”

She closed her laptop, took off her glasses, and put her hands around his face. “Good. As long as we're clear.” She nibbled his lower lip. “Well, you've broken my concentration now, and I'm not going to be able to work.”

He grabbed her legs and pulled them around, shifting so that he was between them. “I’m really sorry about that, babe. Let me see if I can make it up to you.” He kissed her bare belly where his shirt had spread open. He slid his hands under the shirt and up to her breasts.

She pulled off his beanie and threaded her hands through his hair. He pinched and rolled her nipples between his thumbs and fingers as hard as he dared. She sucked in her breath and arched into his hand at his touch. He was still getting used to her preference for heavy touch. He’d learned that Lilli liked a little manhandling. She didn’t want to get hit or hurt—thank God, because he couldn’t imagine doing something like that—but she liked to be moved around, and she preferred a firm grip to a feathery touch. She was intensely passionate, and she approached sex with a sense of abandon. It was unbelievably hot, and it gave him a chance not to hold back. But he worried about crossing a line and hurting her.

Admittedly, sometimes he didn’t worry about that line as much as he wished he did. Though he’d never been like this before, there were times when he was rough with Lilli without thinking about it, as if it were a kind of compulsion. The first time had been only their second night together, after he and Jax had almost been killed by the Russians. He had been sure they would be killed, and his rage at the bitter irony of finding Lilli only to be killed hours later had set off a klaxon in his head. After they’d been rescued by the Galindos and had retaliated, he was desperate to get back to her and reclaim the calm contentment he’d felt with her in his arms.

He’d found, though, that calm was elusive, and he’d sat in her living room with his nerves abuzz. He’d asked to take a shower to try to relax, and then she’d asked to join him. He’d still been struggling with the rage and fear of the day, and his control hadn’t been very good. When she’d looked him in the eyes and told him to “go for it,” he’d realized that he already loved her completely. She’d placed trust in him exactly at a moment when he didn’t deserve it. How could she have known that he wouldn’t go too far? Hell, *he* hadn’t even known. But she had trusted him anyway.

She had helped him. She had calmed him. She had enjoyed it herself. And she continued to help him in that way when he needed it. He wasn’t sure what kind of man it made him to need to be rough with the woman he loved in order to be okay with the things that happened in his life. Not a good man, that’s for sure. He was lucky he had Lilli, who accepted it without question, and whose own preferences made room for what he needed.

And now she was moaning and squirming sexily under his firm touch. Still pinching and twisting her nipples, he unbuttoned her jeans with his teeth, and she gasped and lifted her hips up. He caught her zipper and pulled it down, pausing to nuzzle at her soft mound. He lifted his head and smiled, his eyebrows raised. “Commando?”

She gave him a sly smile. “Felt like an *au naturel* kind of day.”

“Well, it’s hot as hell.” He pinched, and she arched.

Panting a little now, she said, “Trust me, I know. I love when you don’t wear any.”

Releasing her breasts, he grabbed her jeans and jerked them to her ankles. She kicked free of them and spread her legs wide, giving him a fantastic view of her small triangle of dark, neatly trimmed hair and everything below it. He slid his hands under her ass and brought it up as he leaned in to taste her. He pressed his tongue into her and she sucked in a sharp breath. “Fuck, Opie.”

He licked up and over her clit, his tongue flat and firm on her. God, he loved the feel of her, the taste of her. She clutched his head tight to her as he lapped at her; then she pulled up on his hair. Reluctantly, he looked up. “I want to come with you inside me,” she breathed.

Alrighty then. He pulled her into his arms and stood up. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to the bed and laid her down. Wearing only his shirt, barely buttoned, and looking goddamn sexy, she watched him slide kutte off and pull his t-shirt over his head. Then she sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. She undid his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. She smiled as she pulled him free of the denim.

“Like I said, I love it.” She put her mouth around him and gave him a solid suck that made his entire body clench. He arched his back and groaned. He pushed her back, and she let him slide out of her mouth. He pulled off his boots and socks before he let his jeans drop to the floor and stepped out of them. He leaned over and grabbed a couple of pillows from the head of the bed. Then he caught both her legs under her knees and lifted her ass off the bed, folding the pillows and pushing them under, resting her down on top of them. She lay back on the bed as he moved between her legs. She was positioned so that her hips were high off the bed and canted up at the perfect angle to take him where he stood. He pushed slowly into her; as soon as he was fully sheathed, she wrapped her legs around his hips. He grabbed her thighs in his hands and began to move. She took her breasts in her own hands and twisted her nipples. He loved it when she touched herself.

As if reading his mind, she moved one hand down to rub her clit. He pumped harder as she started to make breathy whimpers with each exhale. Her hips were moving against his thrusts, deepening each penetration. The muscles in her abdomen rippled as she writhed against her hand and his cock. “Jesus, Lilli. I love to watch you.”

He picked up his pace, and she kept up with him. They were slamming together with abandon. As she got closer, her hand moving fast between her legs, she started to whisper, “God, yes. Oh, harder, Opie. There. There.” And then her sexy mumbles became sexier grunts.

He leaned forward, dropping his hands to the bed on either side of her. The change of angle pushed her over into orgasm, and she grabbed his arms, her fingernails digging into his triceps, and arched her back. She didn’t scream, but her whole body was tense with the effort of holding it back. A few more deep thrusts, and he came, too, with a groan, pushing hard into her.

He loomed over her for several seconds, catching his breath. Then he slid gently out of her, lifted her legs to pull the pillows free, and dropped onto the bed next to her. She grabbed his hand in hers and gasped, “That was *way* more fun than writing a syllabus.” He chuckled.

They lay together, petting each other and chatting aimlessly. Opie thought maybe he was happiest in moments like this, after sex, when they were totally relaxed and in sync. The world felt a thousand miles away. These were practically the only times that his head was quiet, filled with nothing but his love for Lilli. He pressed his face into the crook of her shoulder and kissed her in his favorite spot.

Then Gemma called from the other side of the door, “Ope, when you’re done putting it to her, I could use Lilli’s help in the kitchen!” She rapped hard twice on the door.

They snickered; Lilli rolled her eyes. “She’s got such a lovely way with words.” Then she sighed, squeezed his hand, and stood up. She went looking for her jeans.

Opie felt bereft. He propped up on his elbows. “Where you going, babe?”

“Well, I’m not sure why, but I suddenly had this thought that I should go help get dinner together.” He grinned at that.

He sat up and pulled her between his legs. He held her close, his head on her chest. “Stay here with me. I’m not ready for you to go.” He grabbed the hand that she’d had between her legs and sucked a finger into his mouth, tasting her. His cock pulsed and hardened against her leg.

She moaned softly and swirled that finger around his tongue, then pulled it out of his mouth. “Seriously, love, we’re in too close quarters right now to deal with Gemma in bitch mode. Pretty soon, she’s going to be back here pounding on the door again. Why don’t we pick this up later, when we can really *focus*.”

“My focus is *fine* right now. Don’t worry about Gemma.”

Lilli leaned down and kissed him. “I tell you what,” she said, nuzzling his chin, “I’ll go cook now. Make you a good meal. Get your strength up. Then, later, back here, we can have some really sinful dessert. Why don’t you think about that for awhile? Now, I’m really going to wash up and get dressed, so I can go help out there. You gonna let me go?”

Opie squeezed her tight. “I’m *never* gonna let you go, babe. *Never*. But okay. I’ll let you up right now. Anyway, I’m hungry. Go fix me some dinner, woman.” She raised her eyebrows and brandished her fist at him. He caught it in his hand, laughing. “Kidding! Kidding!”

*

Opie lay naked on the bed for a while after Lilli had gone. He was happy. He was completely at peace. It was a fleeting feeling, he knew—it would probably recede as soon as he left this room—but he had it. And he’d been having these calm and content moments pretty often in the past few months. Before Lilli, he’d gone years without ever feeling like this. A lot of years. Before he’d been in Chino, at any rate. Well before that, probably. So he lay there and tried to feel it as long as he could.

He still couldn't believe that he'd found Lilli, and that she loved him, despite everything. And she was going to marry him! In this moment, lying on the bed next to the warm spot she'd just filled, with the scent of their love still strong on and around him, he could just about convince himself that their life together would be long and happy.

Huh. A long, happy life. Growing old with Lilli. Wouldn't that be interesting. No kids in that picture, though. He was sure Lilli was, would have been, an amazing mother. He watched her when she was with Abel and Thomas and just knew. He'd been surprised to discover how sorry he was that they couldn't have kids together. He lay on the bed in his shitty little room and imagined holding a baby that was the best of Lilli and him. His heart clenched.

It was for the best, though. His life—and, now, thanks to him, Lilli's life—was too dark and violent for children. A day hardly ever went by without some kind of bloodshed or danger. It was way too much risk and instability for children. It was why Ellie and Kenny were away. He and Donna had them when he was too naïve to understand, when he still thought the MC life, and being raised like he had been, was a good thing. Now he knew better.

A long, happy life was a long shot. At best.

And so ended Opie's peaceful moment, as the gates opened in his mind and his cares surged through. He sighed and went to take a shower.

Chapter 12

Though the lockdown was seriously starting to wear on Lilli, she had to admit that she'd enjoyed hanging around with these weirdoes. The days were hardest, and that's when she felt especially stir crazy. The Sons were often out in groups doing whatever it was they did. Those who stayed around were on guard duty. To leave the compound, for provisions or to get stuff she or anyone else needed from home, practically required a damn planning meeting. She spent most of her days irritated.

But the evenings were actually fun. They made a big dinner every night, and afterward played pool, cards, or video games, or just sat around shooting the shit. This was the part of having SAMCRO as her family that she relished. And even though Opie's room was small and dank, something about being with him in this particular place made her feel even closer to him. She couldn't explain it, but it was a silver lining.

It had only taken her a few cooped-up hours to be heartily sick of hanging out in the clubhouse during the day, though. Then she started looking for things to do. She went out for target practice with the guys a couple of times. Only Chibs was a better shot than she. She started spending a lot of time in their weight room, where the guys mostly left her alone, except when Juice spotted her.

But Lilli's physical strength and steady aim became a subject of conversation, and after dinner on New Year's Day, when they were all lazing on the couches, drinking and bullshitting, Jax and Chibs told the Sons what they'd seen her do at Lumpy's. The rest of them scoffed, which pissed her off. "I'll take any one of you on in the ring right now."

Chibs and Jax demurred with respect, having an idea what she could do. The rest hooted and laughed, but they all backed down with various excuses about not wanting to hit a woman. She snickered and retorted, "Right. You just don't want a woman kicking your ass inside out."

Bobby laughed and chimed in: "I don't know. I think Tig would love that."

Tig replied with a straight face, "Yes. Yes, I really would."

"Okay, Tig, baby. You wanna go?"

Opie interjected at that. "No fucking way, Lilli."

She was sitting on his lap, his arms around her waist. She turned and looked at him. "Seriously, love? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I don't want to sit here and watch Tig hit you."

She patted him on the chest and looked over at Tig. "Don't worry; he won't." The guys exchanged glances, enjoying Lilli's bravado but also keyed into Opie's tension.

Lilli stood up—she had to struggle a little against Opie’s restraining arms—and stepped up to Tig. “Come on, Tig, let’s go a few rounds.” With a look back, she dared Opie to get in her way.

He huffed and made a snide “go ahead” gesture. He gave Tig a murderous look and crossed his arms: “Body shots *only*, asshole.”

Lilli could clearly see Opie’s displeasure, but, after spending so many day in lockdown, she was feeling stifled by his protective streak. She decided she didn’t much care if he was displeased. She looked at Tig. “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt your pretty face.”

She could tell Tig was having second—or maybe it was third—thoughts. He looked at Opie and then at her. “Lilli, I don’t know. You sure you want to do this, doll?”

“Dude, you have no idea. You don’t get in the ring with me, I’ll just take you down right here. I am totally sick of the testosterone poisoning. You guys need to learn that women are more than pussies and tits. Let’s *go*.”

He finally grinned and took off his rings. “Okay. You want to change or anything?”

She was barefoot, wearing yoga pants and a snug tee. “Nope. I’m good. You?”

“Nah. Let’s do it.” He took off his kutte.

“Boots too.” That was Opie.

Now the guys were free to get into it, and they were betting and trash talking and having a great time. The crowd—Sons and most of the grown family members—went out to the ring. Opie stood way back, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Lilli could see he was worried and angry, but she frankly didn’t give a fuck. She took down her ponytail and fixed it again, looping her hair into the band so it was totally out of the way and out of reach, in case Tig turned out to be a hair-puller. He was a biter, so hair-puller was a definite possibility. She climbed into the ring and bounced up and down, waiting for Tig.

He climbed in and said, “You know I can’t hurt you, Lilli.”

She laughed. “Yeah, Tig. I know you can’t. But I want you to try.” The crowd loved that. He shrugged, and they went to opposite corners. Jax said, “Three rounds. Round one.” Then he rang the bell, and they went at it.

They danced around each other, looking for the in. Tig took the first swing, and she dodged it easily. Lilli thought he’d pulled it. *No way, dude*. So she got in the first blow, landing a kick squarely in Tig’s chest. It knocked him back with a “woof!” She crowed inwardly at the look of surprise on his face. He came in with a jab to her stomach; she sidestepped, and he was carried forward with the momentum of his miss. Now he was going for it. *Good*. She spun and swept his leg out from under him. He fell to the mat, and the crowd went nuts. When he got up he looked a little pissed. *Heh*.

Like all the Sons, Tig was a brawler, and he just couldn't keep track of her; she dodged and spun away from him and then used his misses against him. Lilli handed him his balls on a platter, landing several kicks and blows in each round. Tig made contact exactly once. In the second round, he got in a full-force jab to her gut, which knocked her back and to the mat, breathless. She took a beat to fill her lungs—and saw Opie coming fast to the ring—then kipped up to her feet. The move impressed the shit out of the guys, if their reaction was any indication. Then she made Tig pay for the hit.

When Jax rang the bell ending the third round, Tig came up to her and raised her arm. The crowd cheered. He gave her a big hug and whispered in her ear, “You’re an Amazon, baby girl. That was the most fun I’ve ever had getting beat up.”

She could feel his erection, and she pulled her hips back a bit but hugged him around his shoulders. “You are a twisted, horny dude, Tig.”

Opie was in the ring then and pulled Tig off. “Back the fuck off, *brother*.”

Opie led her out of the ring. She was feeling good and let him lead her into the clubhouse, high-fiving and fist-bumping as she went. He led her through the common room and into the hallway, and then she pulled back. “What the fuck, Opie?”

“We need to talk.”

“I’m not going back there with you right now. Not after that. It looks like you’re taking me back to yell at me.”

“That was the plan, yeah.”

“Oh, Jesus. No way.” She yanked her hand out of his and went to the bar. He stood stock still in the hallway for a few seconds, and then he followed.

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She stayed out in the common room with the guys for awhile, drinking and joking around. Their respect for her had a new dimension, that was certain. Opie stayed too, but he never seemed to relax. Okay, she guessed they were going to need to talk or something. Now that she was feeling good and buzzed, she wasn't so pissed herself, so what the hell.

She tossed back a final shot of tequila. She was actually pretty drunk—not slurring and slobbering or anything, but feeling really good. She looked over at Opie, who was studying her quietly. Huh. Maybe she could change the conversation. She smiled at him, then said to the guys at the bar, “Alrighty, boys. I need a shower. It’s been a pleasure educating you all this evening.” She gave Tig a kiss on the cheek. “You might want to take some aspirin before you go to bed, hon. You’re liable to be pretty sore in the morning from that reaming you took today.”

“You can ream me anytime, baby girl.”

She made her exit to a chorus of hoots and cheers.

Opie was right behind her. When they got to his room, he closed the door and leaned on it, arms crossed. Lilli decided there were several things she'd rather do right now than fight. She put her hands on his arms and looked up at him with a pout. “Come on, love. Let's not fight. You don't even have a good reason to be mad.”

He pushed off the door and moved her aside. He walked into the room and turned back to her. “You're wrong. I have a bunch of good reasons. First, you could have gotten hurt, and for what? Second, what do you think it does to these guys to know they could get taken down by a woman?”

“Jesus, Opie. The he-man thing is a real drag, you know? One: maybe I could've gotten hurt. But it was *my fucking choice*. It is not your job to protect me.”

“Yes it is! It is!”

She ignored his interruption and continued. “Two: the biggest reason I *did* it was because of what it would do to them to know I could take them. They needed—*you need*—some eye-opening. I get you feeling like you need to protect me from cartels and stuff like that. Okay. That's reasonable, and, look, I've been here in the clubhouse for a week because I understand. But I *do not* get you insisting I hide behind you for my entire goddamn life. You can't protect me from everything. I need to protect myself, too.”

Opie picked up where he left off. “Do you know what it does to me to watch somebody—*especially Tig*—try to hurt you? It tears me up. Do you even care? And Tig! He shot Donna, Lilli. He blew her brains out, and you just made me watch him throw punches at you. I feel sick.”

Lilli blanched. She hadn't thought. Jesus Christ. She'd been so wrapped up in her own need to prove a point that she hadn't thought.

His face bore a look of abject desperation. She walked up to him and pulled his arms loose so that she could get close and wrap hers around his waist. He rested his hands on her hips. She looked up. “Oh my God, Opie. I didn't even think—I didn't make that connection. I'm so sorry, love. I'm so, so sorry.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I know. It's okay.”

They held each other for a minute, and then Lilli leaned back and looked up at him. “I feel terrible that I didn't make the association between Tig and Donna. I'm sorry I made you go through that. And I'm sorry that you get so worried, love. *Of course* I care. I love you, Opie. Completely. I don't want to cause you pain.” Opie cupped her face in his hand, running his thumb over her cheek.

Lilli caught that hand in her own and continued: “But I have to ask. Can’t you see that your worry is unreasonable? While you were standing there watching, didn’t you see that he couldn’t hurt me?”

Opie looked down at her for a long moment. Then he grabbed the hem of her tee and pulled it up. She smiled and raised her arms. *Good. Let’s move on to the entertainment.* But he didn’t smile back. He tossed the shirt aside. He held her away and took a long look at her belly. Curious, she looked down. A large, nasty-looking bruise flowered just under her ribs—the one hit Tig had gotten in had been a good one. She’d forgotten.

Opie grazed the fingers of one hand lightly across the bruise. She flinched a little; it was tender. “Looks to me like he hurt you.”

She grabbed his beard and pulled his face up so she could look into his eyes. She smiled. “You should see the other guy.”

He grunted in frustration. “Lilli—”

She put her fingers over his mouth. “No, Opie. Enough. It’s not a big deal. I’m not really hurt. And I, quite literally, asked for it.” She stopped, realizing that she might have a way to get him to understand. “When you ask me to let you get between me and the world, you’re asking me to be weak. You’re asking me to be helpless. Can you understand why I don’t want that? That’s not who I am. You love who I am, right?”

He put a hand on her face. “You know I do, babe. God. I love you so fucking much it scares me. *You* scare me. The thought of something happening to you makes me sick to my stomach. It makes me nuts.”

She turned her face into his hand and kissed his palm. “Then being able to take care of myself is a *good* thing, right? You can’t be with me every minute. Right?”

He just looked at her. She took that as a sign that she’d rendered him speechless, and moved on to more romantic pursuits. She was pretty drunk; even after all this, she was really horny. A fight ending with him telling her how much he loved her did nothing to cool her lust. She reached up and pulled off his beanie. She combed his hair with her fingers, bringing it forward to frame his face. She grabbed it in her hands and pulled his head to hers. “If you love me, Opie, then love me.” She pressed her mouth to his. She felt his hand flex around her jaw as he deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue firmly into her mouth.

She caught his tongue in her teeth, biting just gently, but it surprised him, and he flinched. She smiled and took a step back. She vaguely realized that this was the first time she’d ever been actually drunk with him. She was a very horny drunk. And just now, she was feeling like a badass. She gave him a saucy smile. “What do you want to do?”

Opie looked confused. “What do you mean?”

She put her hands on his chest and walked him back until his legs hit the end of the bed. She gave him a little shove, and he sat down. She unhooked her bra and let it drop to the floor. “I mean, I’m offering you a smorgasbord. Whatever you want. All you can eat.” She shimmied out of her yoga pants and stood naked in front of him. She took her breasts in her hands and twisted her nipples.

He swallowed audibly. “God, Lilli. I don’t—I don’t know. We already do everything I want. What do *you* want to do?”

She pinched at the shoulders of his t-shirt, and he pulled it off. She leaned down and licked his neck, nibbling into his beard and along his jaw to his ear. She sucked his earlobe into her mouth and bit down. She felt his hands on her waist. She stood back up and pushed at his chest, encouraging him to slide farther back on the bed. He pulled off his boots and socks and moved back until he could lay his head on the pillows.

She crawled onto the bed with him and undid his belt and fly. He lifted his hips so she could pull his jeans off. Then she licked and nibbled her way up from his calf, pausing, oh, about midway. She took his hard length in her hand and sucked him down her throat. He hissed in a breath and lifted his hips. She released him and continued upward to his neck.

She felt his arms come around her and try to pull her down onto him, but she resisted. “Lilli, babe. I just want to be inside you.”

“Oh, you will be.” She turned around and straddled his head.

She heard him whisper, “Oh God,” as his arms wrapped around her thighs. She leaned down, her breasts brushing against his belly, and took him into her mouth. His arms tightened around her legs, and his hands slid up to clutch her ass. He spread her thighs wide and pressed his face between her folds. The intense pleasure of his mouth against her core distracted her for a second. She pulled him out of her mouth, her hand wrapped around him, and flexed against his face. He thrust his hips up, and she got back to work on him. Every time she sucked him deep into her mouth she felt his moan vibrating on her.

His tongue was all over—inside her, on her clit, back and forth, hard and soft, driving her crazy. His hands were wrapped around her ass, his fingers on the sensitive skin of her cleft. When he clutched her closer to him, his fingers brush against her anus, and she moaned. At her reaction, he pulled his face back a bit, and she felt his fingers gingerly fondling her there, testing out her response. She moaned again and pressed back at him. She was having a hard time focusing on him.

One of his hands left her ass. She released his cock and looked down between them. She saw him put his thumb in his mouth. She closed her eyes and dropped her head to the top of his thigh as he wrapped his arms around her legs again, and then she felt his thumb pressing gently against that tight, ridged ring. She flexed and moaned, and he pulled her hips down against his face. He sucked on her clit, and at the same time, she felt his thumb push into her, go deeper.

“Oh my God, oh my God! Yes!” She came immediately, rearing back, bucking hard against his hand and his mouth, seeking more pressure, more penetration. She came so hard she was brought to tears. He growled loudly and sat up under her. He rolled onto his knees and pushed her forward, pressing her down to lie prone on the bed. She was still spasming when he sank home into her core. His left hand stayed where it was at first, then he gently pulled it out and grabbed her hips in both hands. He pounded into her, grunting hard with each deep thrust. Her waning orgasm picked back up and she bucked against him, her breath coming in heaving gasps. He encircled her hips with his arm and pulled, bringing her up to her knees. He grabbed her ponytail and pulled her hard against his chest, sliding his other hand down her belly to rub tight circles on her clit.

She screamed and arched her back, her entire body rigid as another huge orgasm crested. At the same time, Opie released her hair and wrapped his arm around her hips again, thrusting deep into her and holding, squeezing her hard against him as he came.

They fell together to the bed, exhausted, and Opie pulled out of her. He was still mostly hard, and she gasped. He rolled to the side and looked at her as she lay prone. “Holy shit, Lilli,” he gasped. She was too dazed to respond, but then she saw worry furrow his brow.

He brought a hand to her face. “Babe—are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“What? No! That was fantastic.”

“You’re crying.” He brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers, and she could feel the wet cool of tears.

She smiled and caught his hand in hers. “It was *really* intense, that’s all. In a good way.”

He scooted closer and kissed her shoulder. “I didn’t know you liked that.”

There was really only one new element, so she knew what he meant. “Sometimes, yeah, I do.” She rolled to her side to face him. “I get a little kinky when I’m drunk. But there are boundaries. And I think you’re probably too big for *that*, so don’t get your hopes up, if that’s something you’re thinking about. I wouldn’t be against trying, but there will definitely need to be alcohol involved. Maybe weed, too.” She grinned. “And like a safe word or something.”

“You find a way to surprise the hell out of me just about every day, babe. You are a fucking amazing woman.”

She smiled. Then she yawned. The day had been long and, well, complicated. “I’m going to jump in the shower quick and then I’d like to curl up with you and sleep. Sound okay to you?”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

Chapter 13

The immediate danger passed after the Galindos “handled” the men who’d killed Happy’s family, and everyone, especially the kids, was getting stir crazy, so the club sent everyone home the day after New Year’s. Opie was still extra vigilant, but Lilli’s new and improved acceptance of his need to protect her, limited though it was, and her demonstration of her ability to protect herself, helped him feel less desperate. So the lockdown ended, and life again felt right.

One morning a few weeks later, while Lilli went to campus, Opie drove up to the cabin to check in on his pop. Piney had grown bitter and restless with the way Clay was running the club. He hated maybe more than anyone that they were in deep now with the Galindos, and he’d checked out, spending more and more time alone in the woods with his tequila. He had skipped the lockdown.

They were sitting together on the front porch. Opie had filled his pop in on recent events. Piney was, as expected, disgusted. He ranted for a long time, but nothing he said was new to Opie—in fact, he agreed with most of it. But Piney believed that Clay’s time at the gavel had passed and that Jax should take over and turn the club around. Opie didn’t disagree in principle. He had never been able to fully trust Clay since he’d learned that Donna’s murder landed in the club president’s lap. But Opie was loyal to the MC. He didn’t see Clay stepping down until his arthritic hands gave out entirely, and a regime change before then would fracture the club. There was already strain in the ranks because of the cartel. He didn’t think the Sons could survive a coup right now.

Opie argued with his pop for a while and then they fell quiet. Opie was thinking about Clay, and Donna, and Happy’s family, and the lockdown, and Lilli. Suddenly, second thoughts were crowding his head. He said quietly, “So much of our shit comes down on family. Donna was right to hate it. If Lilli gets hurt because of SAMCRO—I can’t even imagine what I’ll do.” He hesitated, hating the question he was about to ask. “Was it a mistake to propose to her?”

Piney looked out into the woods. “You know Donna was dear to me, son. She was a good mother. She was strong in her way. But you’re right. She wasn’t made for our life. She never wanted the club. There’s not many who would. Bless her soul, Donna was never an Old Lady.” Opie could hear the capital letters in the way his pop said the words.

Piney drained his glass and set it on the porch floor. “SAMCRO now isn’t the club John and I started, but even back in the day, wearing a kutte was rough business. We ask a lot from our families. You know your mom couldn’t handle it. It takes a certain kind of man to do what we do and still have honor, some goodness in his heart. It takes a certain kind of woman to see that honor and goodness and trust it. It takes a *special* kind of woman to give us that trust and then be able to accept the risks of the life. That’s the kind of special Lilli is.

“You need a woman in your life who gives you strength and lets you be the man I know you are, son. You deserve that. You need Lilli.”

Opie interrupted. “Pop, I know Lilli is good for me. She’s everything you say. But I don’t care what *I* need. I care what *Lilli* needs. Being with me puts her in the crosshairs. How can it be right?”

Piney looked disgusted and sat forward. “You’re such an asshole sometimes, Opie. This is the same shit you pulled with your kids. You abandoned them because you think they’re better off without you. You should be ashamed of yourself—and I know you are. But I also understand. Where kids are concerned, when you have to make the choices for them, maybe a different life *is* better.

“But Lilli is *not your kid*. She makes her own choices. You think it’s up to you whether her life is bad or good? Whether she lives or dies? That’s some arrogant bullshit. Bad shit happens every damn day. Sure, we spend more time in the middle of it, but being away from us is no guarantee of a good life. Or a long one. Hell, Lilli knows that better than you!

“I see the way she is with you. You do for her what she does for you. It’s obvious how much she loves you. She deserves better from you than some idiot idea that you can save her by hurting her. You can break her heart and leave her to live a so-called regular life that she doesn’t even want, or you can get out of your damn thick head and *see how fucking lucky you both are*. Make each other happy while you can. *Jesus*. Shithead.” Finished with his lecture, Piney sat back with an aggravated huff.

Opie had never felt so grateful to be called a shithead in his life.

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Three hours later, Opie and Juice were walking through the university campus, tracking Lilli down. The Sons were meeting Romeo and Luis from the Galindos later to pick up a new package. It was the first run since the fire, and the club decided to pull everyone back to the compound until the transaction was complete, just to be on the safe side. Opie was about to test Lilli’s new agreement to let him protect her.

He’d never been on her campus before and had no idea where she taught, but Juice had tracked down her office and her class schedule. She was teaching right now, so they were headed to her classroom.

The classroom door was closed, but there was a small window in it. He peered in. It was a big room, with rows of seats ascending from the front. There were about 100 or so students. Lilli was standing at the front, looking gorgeous. He figured most of the guys—maybe the girls too—had to have huge crushes on her. Her hair was pulled back in a long ponytail. She was wearing a silky, dark purple top over a short black skirt, black tights, and her tall Doc Martens with buckles up the sides. He loved those boots. She looked way too badass beautiful to be a professor.

He just watched for a bit. He could hear her voice but not make out her words. She was smiling and animated, gesturing as she talked, listening to students’ comments, laughing, striding back and forth, ponytail swinging. She said something and the whole class laughed hard. Without

even knowing what anyone was saying, he could see that she was in her element. She owned that room. He puffed up with pride. That was his old lady. And he was about to piss her off. He braced himself and opened the door.

She was talking. “Oooh, good point, Bran—” she turned to the door “—don.” She looked at Opie, stunned. “Um. Excuse me a second, guys.”

She walked over to him, a question on her face. He put a hand on her waist and leaned down near her ear. “Sorry, babe. Can I talk to you outside?”

She cocked her head a little at him and then nodded. She turned back to her students. “I’m going to step out for just a minute, everyone. Sorry about this. I’m sure you can keep yourselves occupied. But no parties without me.” They laughed.

She stepped out into the hall with him and saw Juice. “Uh, hi Juice?” She looked from one to the other. “Okay. What’s up?”

Without giving specifics while they stood there in public, he explained the situation. “We’re bringing everyone to the clubhouse. I’d like you to come with me—”

She interrupted: “I have another class after this one—”

He picked his sentence back up. “—*but* I expected you to say something like that, so I’m offering a compromise. I have to go out, but Juice is going to stay with you and follow you back to Charming when you’re done.”

“A bodyguard? On campus? Christ, Opie. Here? Really?”

“Lilli . . .”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. It’s just—okay.” She sighed and looked at Juice. “What are you going to do, just stand here in the hall?”

Juice smiled and nodded. “Yep. No worries.”

She was obviously not thrilled, but she didn’t resist. She turned back to Opie. “You’re going out on this thing that makes me need a bodyguard, right?” He nodded, and she sighed again. “Okay, then.” She stepped up against him. She pulled a little on his beanie. She grabbed his beard. He put his hands on her hips. “I love you. Please be careful,” she whispered, then kissed him softly. He pulled her tight against him and deepened the kiss, public hallway be damned.

“I’ll be back tonight. I love you,” he whispered. He kissed her forehead.

As she turned back to her classroom, she gave Juice a look. “There are like three doors into that room. If you’re gonna guard dog, you might as well come in and take a seat.” She pointed at him.

“And you behave yourself, bucko. No freshmen for you.” Juice laughed and gave her a little salute. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be in in a second, then.”

When she opened the door, they all saw a large cluster of students scurrying back to their seats. They’d apparently had an audience. Opie wondered what they made of seeing their professor making out with a big biker in the hallway. He grinned at the thought.

He looked at Juice. “You keep her close.”

“You know I will, Ope. I’ll die before anyone touches her.” Opie clapped him on the back. Juice went into Lilli’s classroom, and Opie headed off.

*

Opie, Chibs, Tig, and Happy were standing almost in a row several feet behind Jax and Clay, who were making the exchange with Romeo and Luis. Two big Galindos also stood back, facing the Sons. It was tense, but these exchanges always were. For what it was, this was normal. It looked like the precaution of bringing in the families was unnecessary.

Clay and Jax shook hands with Romeo and Luis. Clay nodded, and Opie and the others stepped forward to load the van. Now that the negotiations were over, everyone relaxed a little, and Opie’s mind wandered, wondering whether Lilli had given Juice a hard time today on campus. Was there really any doubt? He smiled at the thought.

Still smiling, he looked over and saw Jax and Clay in an intense discussion with Luis. Jax turned abruptly and opened his phone. Then: “Bobby. You’re gonna have trouble. Saddle up. We’ll be there as quick as we can.”

Bobby had been with Tara today, and he and Juice and the Prospects had charge of the clubhouse. The clubhouse where they’d put the families for safety. If Bobby was going to have trouble . . .

“Jax! What’s going on?” Just then, a van sped into sight, kicking up dust on the dirt road. Jax pulled his gun, yelled, “Calaveras!” and took cover. The van came to a skidding stop, and out poured half a dozen Calaveras thugs, guns blazing before their feet hit the dirt.

Chapter 14

Tara and Lilli were playing with Abel and Thomas when Bobby called out, “Juice! Rat! Phil!” They heard the urgency in his voice and looked at each other, both instantly concerned. Lilli stood up. “I’ll go see.”

Bobby was speaking quietly and intently when she walked up. He paused, looking at her, and she just looked back, raising her eyebrows in challenge. He nodded and continued. “Romeo got word that Calaveras is coming to hit the clubhouse. We’re on our own for now. We have to hold them off.”

“I’m in. I want a 9mm and an AK. And that sniper rifle Opie gave me to shoot last week.”

Bobby looked at her. “You know that’s not going to happen, Lilli.”

“Fuck you, Bobby. You need me. I’m a better shot than any of you four are, and I don’t want our best protection to be hoping they trip over your bloated body on their way in.” She stared at Bobby in challenge, and he put up his hands. “Good. Then let’s not fuck around.” She gestured at the people behind her. “I’ll let them know what’s going on.”

Bobby nodded, then asked, “We need cover outside. Suggestions?”

Phil cleared his throat. “How about the picnic tables? They’re thick and heavy. We could put them on their sides.”

Bobby nodded again. “Do it. Right now. Rat, go with him. Juice, let’s load up.”

Tara was walking toward her when Lilli turned back to the main area of the room. “What’s wrong?”

“We have trouble coming any minute. Sounds bad. I’m going outside with the guys.”

“Lilli!”

Lilli ignored her and went on: “Tara, you might need to be a doctor, so be ready. And you should have a gun in case you need it in here. Right now, though, we need to get everyone back away from the door—back into the back hall would be best, I think.” Tara nodded and went to talk to the other women. An exodus into the private hallway began.

When Tara came up a few minutes later, Lilli and the Sons were arming up. Lilli handed her two loaded handguns. “Keep them both on you. And stay back.”

Lilli put a 9mm in her waistband, strung an AK across her back, and cradled the M25 she’d recently shot with Opie. Except for the M25, the guys were similarly armed. It was a lot of firepower for hopefully not a lot of Calaveras assholes.

There was a crash outside and the squeal of tires. They'd rammed through the compound gate. It was on. Lilli didn't feel fear—not that she recognized, anyway. She felt exhilarated. She felt powerful. She'd have to think about what the fuck was wrong with her later.

Still dressed in the clothes she'd taught in earlier, she followed the men out, and they arrayed themselves behind the picnic tables just as eight (*oh shit*) bikers rolled out of vans. The Calaveras all drew and made a roughly straight line in front of their vans. One, his face misshapen from a recent beating, stood at the center, AK in hand. “Why you hidin’ *pendejos*? Don’t you pussies wanna fight?”

Bobby stood up, his own AK pointed right at the speaker. Lilli could see the “President” patch on his kutte. “You want to get back into those vans and drive right the fuck back where you came from, *ese*. There’s nothing for you here.”

“Oh, I’m thinking there’s plenty for us here. Coke, guns, money, some cracker pussy. Plenty. Don’t seem to be plenty of Sons, though.”

Juice, Rat, and Phil all stood up, their guns aimed. The guy laughed. “Hey boys—I thought we were gonna have a fight tonight! Looks like we’ll be takin’ out SAMCRO trash instead!”

Lilli stood up, the M25 sighted on the Calaveras president. “You have no idea what kind of fight you’re in for, *pendejo*, if you don’t put your skinny ass back in that van and get the fuck out. You’re not coming near this door.”

She heard Juice from her left side: “Lilli, fuck. Get down!”

“Oho! Now the Sons *have actual pussies*? Really, *chica*? Better listen to pretty boy over there. Wait for me, though. When I’m done with the trash I’ll be back for you. We’ll have a *real* good time. Maybe use that big gun you got.”

She held her ground. “I will put a bullet in your eye if you take one more step forward.”

He spread his arms wide, his AK in one hand. He smiled. And he took one step forward.

Lilli didn’t hesitate. He went down, missing his left eye and most of the back of his head.

And for a moment, hell broke loose. The Calaveras bikers started firing as they ran for cover. The Sons dove behind the barriers they’d erected. Phil brought Lilli down with him.

They were still outnumbered, and the other guys had two big vans for cover. Every now and then, Bobby or someone would fire at the corners of the vans, keeping the rival bikers to their own cover. They didn’t seem inclined to try an escape. This was a stalemate, at least until the ammo ran out on one side or the other.

After fifteen minutes, maybe more (it was hard to tell), Lilli heard bikes roaring up. The rest of the Sons led their own van through, and the Calaveras gang started firing on them. Jax, Clay,

Opie, and Tig dumped their bikes and fired back, but they only had their sidearms. Happy opened the driver's door of the van and fired through the window. Lilli didn't see Chibs. That was bad.

With Calaveras now focused on the newly arrived Sons, Bobby gestured to Juice to flank and surround them. The guys stood up. Lilli set down the sniper rifle, swung the AK forward, and stood up. Bobby waved her off. She flipped him off and kept going.

Bobby, Juice, and Rat sidled around the nearer van; Lilli led Phil around the farther. She was coming up behind the whole scene. Firing into Calaveras meant firing toward Sons. So she tipped the AK down slightly and strafed. She took out the legs of three Calaveras on one pass, then ducked back around the van.

After that, the shooting was over within a few brief minutes; Calaveras was all dead. Then Jax yelled, "Get Tara! Chibs is down!" Lilli ran back into the clubhouse. Tara met her with her gun drawn, then pulled it up when she realized it was Lilli. "It's over. Jax is okay. But Chibs is hurt, Tara. They're bringing him in."

They started back outside, but the Sons burst through the door carrying an unconscious and bleeding Chibs. Opie was up front, holding his shoulders. Lilli's heart dropped. Opie's head, shoulders, and chest were absolutely covered in blood. "Jesus, Opie! Are you hurt?"

He pushed past her, his first priority getting Chibs some help. "It's not mine, babe. I'm okay."

Lilli stepped back and got out of the way. In a few minutes, Opie, Jax, and Tig came out. They looked terrible but were, apparently, not hurt. Lilli ran into Opie's embrace. He was a bloody mess, but she could not have cared less. They held each other tight for a long, quiet moment.

Opie pulled back and studied her. She used her hands to wipe the blood off his face, ensuring that it really wasn't his. Some of it was—he had a cut across his eyebrow—but otherwise he looked unhurt. He grabbed her hands and held them to his chest. "What *was* that, Lilli? What were you doing out there?"

Bobby came up from behind. "She was kicking ass, Ope. She took the new Calaveras prez down."

Opie turned on him. "*She* took him out? Putting her out front is your idea of protecting her?"

"No, it's *my* idea of protecting *myself*." Lilli's voice was low but firm; Opie turned back to her. She was really fucking sick of this macho bullshit. "How many times do we have to run this track, Opie?"

"Come on, Lilli. People were *shooting* at you. I can't be upset about that?"

"People shoot at *you* at least once a week! I'm supposed to be okay with *that*!" She took a breath. She was too relieved he was okay, too exhausted, and too stunned by the night's events to want this fight again. "Look, Opie. They came at the clubhouse. It's full of kids and women who *do*

need protecting. We needed all the shooters we had. All I did was help protect them and myself in the way my father trained me.

“And, by the way, I shot a man’s eyeball through the back of his head tonight, so I’m kinda at my freakout max right now. You want to be all macho and protective, I could really use some help with that.”

Opie wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and kissed her forehead before pulling her to his chest. “God. I’m sorry, babe.”

Lilli hated herself for it, but she started to cry anyway.

*

Chibs had been shot in the chest, but it had miraculously missed the important stuff, and Tara had been able to remove the bullet, sew him up, and get him more or less back on his feet. Lilli assisted as best she could. He’d lost a lot of blood, but once he regained consciousness he was adamant that he not be taken to the hospital. The hospital would have asked questions, so no one—not even Tara—fought him very hard. Once he was bandaged, he was carried to one of the recliners and catered to. The club would take care of him, under Tara’s supervision—with the proviso that he was in a hospital bed at the first sign of infection or shock. Then Tara stitched up Opie’s eyebrow.

Unser came by while Tara and Lilli were working on Chibs. Clay and Jax talked to him outside for a long time. Whatever they talked about, the result was that there wouldn’t even be an investigation. Lilli didn’t fully understand how Charming was able to ignore or avoid so much of this, but she didn’t much care, either. The Prospects were rounding up the Calaveras bodies and stacking them in their vans.

While the cleanup was underway (Lilli got malicious thrill out of think about disposing of the bodies as “taking out the trash”), the Sons were at the table. Opie told her later that they were going to try to nail down the reason for the attack, though they were pretty sure it was part of the Galindo/Lobo cartel war. But they’d completely destroyed the Calaveras MC, literally killing every single patch, and they therefore couldn’t see where any retaliation would come from. Even if the attack had been part of the cartel war, it wasn’t the cartel way to retaliate in the name of a lesser player, unless it was part of negotiated terms. If retaliation happened, it would be from Galindo, on Lobo, for compromising their transaction. But Clay and Jax were confident that Romeo would consider the elimination of Calaveras to be sufficient.

So, well past midnight, most everyone headed home. Jax and Tara were staying to take care of Chibs. Gemma and Clay had already taken the kids to their house for the night. Opie and Lilli were putting things to rights in the clubhouse. Though there had been a couple of haphazard attempts to clean themselves up, they were both still more or less covered in blood—Opie mostly in Chibs’ and that of the Calaveras guy he’d shot point blank in the face, and Lilli in whatever had rubbed off Opie onto her as well as more of Chibs’ from assisting Tara. Lilli was sticky and

exhausted and sore in every atom. She was sitting alone at the bar after finishing her third deep glass of tequila, her head on her arms.

Opie came up behind her and wrapped her in his arms. She sat up so that he could surround her more completely and rested back against him. He kissed the side of her head and whispered, “Come on, babe. Let’s go back to my room.” She nodded. He took her hand and led her back.

As soon as he closed the door, he again came up behind her and folded her into his embrace. He leaned down and pressed his face into the crook of her shoulder. She turned around and curled into him, her fists clutching his shirt, her forehead against his chest. He held her for a while, and then she felt his kiss on her head, her ear, her cheek. She tipped her face up to his and he pressed his lips to hers, gently. She moved her hands up and behind his head, under his beanie, into his hair, and pressed him more firmly to her. He groaned, and she slid her tongue into his mouth. The metallic tang of blood was strong in her nose. She could taste it in their kiss.

He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. He started the shower, made it hot, and they undressed each other. Neither of them had yet spoken a word. They showered together, washing away the blood and grime of the night. The water swirled thick and red down the drain.

The shower was small and Opie was large, so they were tangled together. Lilli tipped her head back to rinse shampoo out of her hair and away from her face, lingering under the calming spray, her breasts pressed against Opie’s chest. The hotlick feel of wet skin on skin made her nipples prickle. She heard him hum deeply and felt a hand on her ass, pressing her more completely to him, and his other hand on her chest, over her collarbone, his fingers curled around her neck. His cock was hard between them.

She brought her head back up. His green eyes were hooded, his mouth was open slightly, his breath was heavy. She grabbed hold of his wet beard and pulled his mouth to hers. He slid his hand into her hair and kissed her, hard and deep. He reached behind her to turn off the water and then carried her, both still dripping, to bed.

He laid her on the bed. As he lay down beside her, Lilli rolled onto her stomach and turned her head toward him. She lifted her hips off the bed a couple of inches, pushing her ass up, and shimmed her hips just slightly before resting back down on the bed. She watched him take in the vista she presented to him, and then she felt his hand on her shoulder. He shifted to lie on his side against her, propped on his elbow, and slowly moved his hand down the length of her back, over the swell of one cheek—lingering there for a second—and down her leg. He grabbed her thigh and pulled it toward him, spreading her legs apart. He rolled and shifted to kneel between her legs. He leaned forward, his hands on the bed at her hips, and she could feel the wet ends of his hair and his beard leaving cool, ticklish trails along her skin as he kissed his way across and down her back. She felt his tongue swirling around the dimples at her lower back. And then his hands were kneading her ass and thighs, his thumbs coming closer and closer to her pulsing core.

She came up on her knees, and he slid a hand between her legs to finger her clit and then push his fingers inside her. She felt his touch straight through her spine, and she gasped and bucked.

His fingers were wet with her, and he slid them back along her cleft, circling the ridges of her anus. He slid a finger in, and she moaned and pushed back at him.

She looked over her shoulder at him. “We can try.”

Opie groaned and turned his finger in her. “You sure, babe?”

What he was doing felt amazing. “Mmmm. Yeah. Please. But slow.” She tightened around him.

He groaned again. He slid his finger out and added another, stretching her more. The pressure was heavy and sweet, and her clit throbbed. He gently pistoned his fingers several times and then scissored them inside her. She was gasping and so wet she could feel trails trickling along her folds.

Without removing his fingers, Opie pushed into her core, using her arousal as lubrication. “Ah, God, you’re wet,” he murmured. He pulled out and shifted slightly on his knees.

Then he eased his fingers out of her and moved into position, first pushing gently against the tight flesh. She dropped her chest to the mattress, opening herself to him more. He pushed harder, entering her and stopping a couple of inches in. She gasped and whimpered. The pressure was intense.

“Holy fuck, Lilli,” he gasped. “You’re so hot and tight. Are you okay?”

“I’m good. Keep going.”

He slid back until only his tip was in her, then pushed in farther. She moaned. “Don’t let me hurt you, babe. Please stop me before I hurt you,” he whispered.

She was panting and reeling; it was hard to talk. “Okay. More.”

Again he pulled back and pushed in more. She had taken almost all of him now. She moaned and flexed. He gasped as she moved, and he clenched his fingers around her hips. “God, Lilli. You feel so *goddamn* good.” She squeezed all the muscles that mattered, and he grunted hard.

So quick it almost had to be a reflex, he pulled back and then into her completely before she quite knew what was happening. She cried out. His surge forward overbalanced her and nearly flattened her on the bed. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her up. The sudden changes in angle and penetration were unbelievably intense, and Lilli cried out again.

Opie sat back on his heels and pulled her onto his lap, flush against his chest. He pressed his mouth to her shoulder; she could feel his heavy breathing against her skin. He lifted his lips slightly and asked, “How you doin’, babe?”

He was fully sheathed in her but keeping still, letting her adjust. The pressure of his cock filling her in this way was overwhelming. She felt stretched and full and so turned on she couldn't think. "I'm good. You?"

"This feels fucking incredible." He bit down on her shoulder.

She clutched at his legs between hers and flexed her hips, making him moan. He took her hands and lifted them up and around to drape behind his head, then slowly traced his fingers down the length of her arms until they met her chest. Lilli leaned her head back against his shoulder.

He cupped both breasts in his hands, flicking his thumbs across her erect nipples. All of her nerve endings felt electrified, and the sensation of his hands and fingers on her breasts was almost too much to bear. She started flexing her hips against him, making the pressure inside her pulse. He began to pinch and twist her nipples. Her breath was coming heavy, in sighs and moans. She grabbed handfuls of his wet hair.

He dropped his forehead to her shoulder, panting hard. He started to rock gently in time with her. They were moving together, their tempo increasing. She was close; she could tell he was, too. She felt one of his hands leave her breast and move down her abdomen to settle between her legs and make tight, firm circles on her clit. Then his hand slid down farther, and she felt his fingers sliding into her. *Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus*. He had her pelvis in a grip, his fingers inside her, his palm against her clit. His other hand was still kneading and tweaking her breast. He was stimulating her in every conceivable way.

Her need was huge and building. And then it was there. She bent forward in a rush, her hands dropping to land on his knees, and she bucked urgently against his thrusts, feeling that the stretch was too much but not caring, screaming when she finally peaked. With a roar, Opie lifted off his heels and pushed her down onto the bed, his hands on her hips, thrusting into her until he was spent.

He collapsed on her, pressing her into the mattress for a moment, before remembering himself. Shaking, he pulled—gingerly, slowly—out of her. It hurt, but she caught herself before she made a sound. He slid to her side, one of his large legs draped over hers, his arm around her waist.

They were both panting heavily. Lilli felt utterly exhausted and used up. Opie brushed her hair out of her face. "Babe? Lilli? Are you okay?"

She was, but she was also dazed and sore. "I'm good. *That* was good. Really, really good. Not an everyday thing though, okay?"

"Agreed. Jesus Christ, that was intense. You're sure you're okay?"

Lilli smiled and reached out to run her fingers through the beard on his cheek. "I'm sure, love. I think I'm going to want another shower, though. Care to join me?"

Opie pressed her hand to his face. “You bet.” She started to pull away and sit up, but he held her to him. “I wish I knew how to make you know much I love you.”

“You do, love. In so many ways.” She rolled to her side facing him and wound herself into his embrace. Yes, she was definitely sore. But she forgot that as they kissed, a slow, sweet, gently exploring kiss. When it ended, she rolled over, carefully, and sat up at the side of the bed, carefully. She didn’t want Opie to notice that she was sore; she knew he’d take it badly. They hadn’t done anything she didn’t want to do. Hell, she’d initiated it, and the pleasure had been indescribable. But he was big, and she was feeling that now.

She stood up (*okay—ouch*) and headed to the bathroom. Opie came quickly around the bed and caught her by the elbow. “Lilli. You’re not okay.” She opened her mouth to say, again, that she was fine, but he interrupted her. “Please, just tell me.”

Dammit. She looked at him, weighing her options. She wanted to keep these festivities on the menu, but she knew he knew she was feeling some aftereffects. She sighed. “I’m a little sore, yeah. I *am* okay, just sore. I don’t want that to freak you out. As far as I’m concerned it was *totally* worth it—but that’s why I don’t want this to be an everyday thing. But I also don’t want to never do it again.”

The concern was clear on his face, but he just kissed her forehead. “Thank you for telling me. Let’s talk some other time about whether we’ll do it again.”

Then he lifted her gently into his arms and carried her to the shower, where he washed her tenderly. After, he carried her back to bed, and she nestled against his side.

*

As pale dawn light was beginning to overtake the night, she woke aroused. Opie was lying facing her, caressing her, running his hands lightly up and down the lengths of her arm, her leg, down her back, over the swell of her ass.

She opened her eyes to see him propped on an elbow and watching her. When he saw that she was awake, he leaned down and touched his forehead to hers. “Let me in, Lilli. I want to love you gentle.”

Still foggy with sleep, she rolled onto her back. He rolled with her and settled on top of her, his legs between hers. He was propped on his forearms, his hands in her hair. He leaned down and kissed her softly, his lips moving lightly over hers. She kissed him back but didn’t try to deepen it; gentle sounded pretty good just now.

For a long time they lay like that, kissing lightly, Opie’s hands laced in her hair, her arms looped around his back, his cock between them, hard but still. Finally, Lilli couldn’t take it anymore. Her core was wet and throbbing. She wanted him in her. She pressed her hands against his back to push him closer to her, and she slid her tongue into his mouth. He grunted and deepened this kiss with her, but he didn’t move otherwise.

She brought her legs up to wrap around him—and hissed sharply as her body reminded her about the previous night. Opie rose up on his hands immediately, looking down at her, worried.

“Oh, shit, Lilli. You *are* really hurt. Goddammit.” He lifted away from her as if to move off.

She held him tight to her. “I don’t want to stop. I want you to love me right now. Gentle, like you said. Please.” No point in saying she was okay; she was, really, but she was also a little bit hurt.

He looked down at her, uncertain. She finished wrapping her legs around him—now that they were already up alongside his hips, it didn’t hurt—and squeezed. He let go a long breath and kissed her again, his tongue probing her mouth. Then he leaned to one side and moved his hand down to position himself at her entrance. He slid into her slowly. The soreness she felt underneath increased her sensitivity, and she gasped and closed her eyes.

Opie stopped. She opened her eyes to see him watching her carefully, worried. “No, love. It’s good. It’s so good.” She flexed her hips slightly, and he closed his eyes and pushed in the rest of the way.

He moved slowly, his rhythm steady. He kissed her again and didn’t stop. He’d never been more gentle. Lilli relaxed into the pleasure, floated on it. She shifted so that she could wrap her arms around his neck and comb her fingers through his glorious hair.

They stayed like that, connected, him moving in her, bringing them toward something far away, for a long time. Then, finally, something in her pleasure changed, and Lilli needed more. She moaned and flexed. She felt a catch of pain but didn’t care. She tried to bring Opie deeper.

He was breathing heavily, and she knew he was feeling what she was feeling, but still he resisted her attempts to escalate. He wouldn’t push harder; he wouldn’t move faster. He lifted his lips from hers. “Shhh, babe. Easy. Just relax and let it come.”

She whimpered in frustration but eased back and tried to relax, closing her eyes. She could feel him shaking, straining to hold back, but still he stayed steady, kissing her, pushing deeply but gently into her, his rhythm unchanging. They continued on like that for what seemed like forever, Lilli’s pleasure expanding so subtly that she was surprised when she realized that she was about to come.

Her eyes flew open. He was right there, his green eyes watching her intently, the toll of his effort written all over his face. She was panting and moaning and suddenly so close. “God, Opie,” she gasped. “Now. I need to move.”

He nodded. She flexed her legs and canted her hips hard. She barely noticed the twinge of pain. She came, moaning. At the same time, Opie groaned, “Ah, God!” and pushed into her as far as she could take him and held there.

They clutched each other tight like that, pulsing, until they both were done. Then Opie pulled gently out of her and moved to her side, pulling her with him. She scooted back to settle into his embrace. They linked fingers, and Opie nuzzled her neck.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Oh, Lilli, I love you,” he answered.

And they slept again.

PART THREE: SPRING

Chapter 15

Opie walked up behind Lilli and wrapped an arm around her waist. With his other hand, he swept the thick, dark curtain of her hair aside and pressed a kiss to her neck, at the crook of her shoulder. He took a deep breath and savored the smell of her. “You about ready, babe?”

She settled into his embrace for a second, reaching up and running her fingers through his hair. Then she zipped shut her backpack. “Yep. You want me to call Tara and find out if they’re good to go?”

“Nah. I’ll call Jax.”

They were heading south. He and Jax had to meet a cartel contact in Riverside County—which should be as low risk as their shit got these days—and Lilli was giving a lecture or something at a conference in San Diego during her spring break. So they’d decided to combine the two, bring Tara, and make a vacation out of it. Lilli had convinced him to stop in Ontario so she could meet his kids. That made him nervous, but she was right. He couldn’t very well marry her without her meeting his children.

Lilli had booked them into adjoining rooms at the conference hotel, on the beach. They were riding down; they’d rent a car to see Ellie and Kenny. They’d be gone five days. With two days riding, round trip, and a day for their various jobs, they should have a day or two to relax, if all went well.

It would be nice if all went well for once.

*

The ride down went smoothly and was a blast. They’d started early, after Gemma had come by to pick up Abel and Thomas, and they’d made good time, stopping only once, for gas and a fast-food lunch, so they could hit San Diego before dark.

Opie loved riding the shovelhead with Lilli. It was a great bike, with a sweet ride. Even though she’d given it to him as a gift, he thought of it as *their* bike, and he never rode it without her. The seat was such that they sat at about the same level, while Lilli sat up higher on his Dyna, and he loved the feeling of sheltering her completely behind him. He loved it a lot, actually. It took real effort to stay focused on the road when he could feel her thighs along his, her chest against his back, and her arms around his waist. *Damn.*

He was impressed that Lilli and Tara had each packed with only one backpack. One of the many benefits of loving a low-maintenance woman. Everything the four of them needed for the week fit in their saddlebags, even with the stuff Lilli needed to bring for work. Then again, he knew for a fact some of her clothes weren’t taking up much space. Her bathing suit, for example. He was really hoping there’d be a chance for her to wear that tiny thing.

It was late March. The weather they'd left behind in Charming was overcast and chilly, but 500 miles south it was clear and unseasonably warm, especially in the late afternoon, when they arrived at the hotel. It was the nicest one Opie had ever stayed in. Lilli was footing the bill for them all. It made Opie uncomfortable when she spent too much of her money—not because he had a thing about her having more money than he did, but because he did *not* want the club to get wind of her bottom line. Clay especially would see it as SAMCRO's own private nest egg. She didn't like lying, but she'd agreed to make up a story about the university covering the cost of their room and her having hotel membership points to cover Jax and Tara's.

It was a nice enough hotel that the staff was put off by the tattooed bikers in their kutties and wallet chains, but it was also nice enough that they were too professional to be *too* obvious about their contempt. Just enough to make sure they felt it. Walking away from the desk after they got checked in, Jax and Opie exchanged an irritated glance, but Lilli let loose her perverse sense of humor. She dropped her pack, jumped into his arms, and wrapped herself around him, right in the middle of the atrium. Then she laid a *serious* kiss on him. She took him by surprise, but he grabbed onto her ass and went along for the ride. When she was done, she jumped off him, grabbed up her pack, turned and smiled at the bemused desk agent, and sauntered off to the elevators, the buckles up the sides of her Docs jingling faintly. Opie laughed at the thought that his sassy, badass old lady was a millionaire professor, here to give a lecture. He wondered what the snooty desk agent would think about *that*.

Their rooms were adjoining, but they kept the connecting doors closed, agreeing to take some private time and then head out for some grub in a couple of hours. It was a pretty nice room, not extravagant, but with a king-size bed and a small balcony overlooking the ocean. Lilli opened the balcony door and stepped out. She leaned over the railing and watched the waves rolling against the beach.

Opie just watched her ass. Nothing out there was as beautiful as Lilli's ass.

He walked up behind her, grabbed her hips, and pulled her against him. Doing exactly that was the first sexual thought he'd ever had about her, and it still felt like a fantasy every time he actually did it. He was rock hard—from the ride, from that hot damn kiss downstairs, and from watching her lean over the railing. His cock was throbbing. When Lilli shifted her hips to rub back and forth against him, he grunted and pressed more firmly to her.

She turned around, rubbing against him all the way. He slid his hands from her hips around and up her back, up to her head, bringing her tight against him as he threaded his fingers into her hair. He leaned down, and she looped her arms tight around his neck. He covered her mouth with his and groaned when their tongues met. He stood up straight as they kissed, pulling her onto her toes. He felt her hands under his beanie, in his hair, pressing his head to hers. He slid his hands down her back and over her ass until he could clutch her thighs and pull her all the way off the ground. When she wrapped her legs around him, he turned and walked them back into the room.

The bed was covered with crap—their backpacks, her jacket, his kutte and jacket—and he didn't want to stop touching any part of her to make room. So he brought them down to the floor. She

pulled off his beanie. He pushed up onto his hands and looked down at her. She was panting and flushed, her lips red and made even fuller by their kiss. Jesus, she was beautiful.

She pulled at the hem of his shirt, and he yanked it over his head and threw it to the side. He closed his eyes with a groan as she trailed her fingernails over his chest. He sat back on his heels, and her legs fell from his waist to rest on either side of him. He slowly undid the little pearl buttons of her white cotton shirt, pulling the hem from her jeans as he went. Her bra hooked in the front; Lilli arched her back when he released the clasp with one hand.

He bent over her and pressed his lips to one lovely nipple and then the other. Lilli moaned and laced her hands into his hair, holding him close. He suckled her until she was gasping and writhing under him. She whispered, "Please, Opie!" He pulled away and sat back, and she whimpered, flexing her hips toward him. He pushed her back down to the carpet with one hand, inching it down to rest his palm against the mound between her legs. He could feel her heat through her jeans. He closed his eyes again and fought for control.

He ran his other hand down her boot, from her knee to her ankle, feeling each buckle lightly graze his palm. He pulled it off, then did the same with the other. At the same time, Lilli unbuckled her belt and undid her jeans. Opie tossed her second boot aside and lifted her legs up to rest on his shoulders. He grabbed her waistband and pulled her jeans and thong off in one move, tossing them behind him. He looked down the length of her thighs to the point where they joined. She was glistening wet. "Jesus, Lilli."

She flexed her hips and moaned. "Come on, then, love. I'm waiting."

He eased her legs back down, one on either side of him, and undid his own jeans before he stretched out on top of her. She brought her legs up right away and used her heels to push his jeans off his ass. She reached between them and grabbed his cock; he grunted as she squeezed and pulled gently, guiding him to her. He kissed her hard as he thrust fully into her in one long, strong move. She tore her mouth away, arching back with a gasp. "You feel so good!"

On the ride down, he'd entertained an image of slow, sweet, softly lit sex in a nice hotel, but here they were on the floor, and any thought of going slow or easy fled his mind as her muscles clamped around his cock and she thrust her hips up hard. Lilli didn't often have the patience for sweet sex, and right now he didn't have the patience to calm her. He chuckled, but it came out more like a groan. "Okay, tiger. Let's go." He pulled almost all the way out of her and slammed back. She cried out, and he felt her nails digging into his arms.

Then she pushed on his shoulders. He knew what that meant—he rolled them over, bringing her on top. She pushed herself upright, and he grabbed her hips as she rocked on him, her nails biting into his pecs. He watched her face as she surged on him, and she held his eyes with hers. Finally, she closed her eyes, her hips moving hard and fast, and he bent his legs and rocketed his hips against hers. She arched back and screamed, her nails drawing sharp lines down his chest. He sat up and picked up his own tempo, coming at last with a long, hoarse grunt.

Panting hard, he relaxed back onto the floor, and pulling her with him to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "Welcome to San Diego," she said against his skin.

*

When Opie woke the next morning, he sensed immediately that he was alone in the room. He lifted his head and looked around. It wasn't even 7:00 yet. There was a note on Lilli's pillow: "ON THE BEACH." His lips quirked up: she'd drawn a heart in the corner of the hotel notepaper. He sat up, stretched, and ran his hands through his hair.

On his way to the bathroom, he grabbed his jeans from the floor near the door, smiling at the memory of bringing a quite pleasantly drunk Lilli back to the hotel after their night with Tara and Jax on the boardwalk. If she'd had her way, he would have lost these jeans in the elevator, while Jax and Tara watched.

He was surprised that she was up and out so early. Then again, he'd never known her to be hung over. She didn't get drunk often, but she never seemed to feel any ill effects when she did. Not from the booze, anyway.

He left the bathroom and walked out onto the balcony. The morning air was a little cool on his bare chest, but warmer than he'd expected. The hotel's beach was private and almost empty except for a couple of runners. And Lilli. She was about ten feet or so from the surf, on packed sand, about 50 feet from him, standing on what looked like a hotel towel, wearing snug black knit pants and a light green, long-sleeved t-shirt. She was doing yoga. He watched, entranced, as her lithe, lovely body moved fluidly through a long series of complicated positions. He'd never seen her do yoga before. He wished he were closer, but he also liked getting this sense of her in a private moment.

Watching her body bend and fold and balance, he understood why they'd yet to try a sexual position she couldn't handle. She could make her body do whatever she wanted. He watched as she arched into a deep back bend and held it. Then she kicked her legs over, ending in a split. *Jesus*. She leaned on her arms and swung her legs out somehow, laying her chest on the ground, her legs spread out fully to either side. He was really starting to wish she'd get back to their room.

Instead, she folded her legs and rested her hands on her knees, her back rod straight. She sat there, perfectly still, for a long time. Meditating, he supposed. He felt like he probably should stop watching her, but he found himself fixated on the vision of Lilli facing the Pacific, alone on the beach, the morning sea breeze making her ponytail dance across her strong, straight back.

After several minutes during which he was as still as she, she unfolded her legs and rose, bent at the waist, her face against her straight legs. She stood up and shook out her arms and legs, then grabbed the towel and headed back to the hotel. About halfway back, she looked up at the building, as if she were looking for him. She saw him and smiled broadly. He blew her a kiss, and she picked up her pace, trotting over the mounds of sand back to the hotel.

He heard his phone ringing on the desk, so he went back into the room and grabbed it—Jax. “Yeah, man,” he answered.

“We should be on the road by 9:00 to make this meet—it’s about 70 miles away. But Tara wants breakfast.” Opie looked at the alarm clock beside the bed: 7:30.

Lilli wasn’t usually a breakfast eater; neither was he. The coffee in the room would suffice for them. “That’s cool. Lilli’s got her thing this morning. She’s been working out, so she’s not going to be ready to eat. You guys go ahead and get breakfast—we’ll get together after. Just knock.”

“Cool, bro. See you soon.”

Lilli came in just as he snapped the phone shut. “Hey, babe. How was your workout?”

“Really great. I love the ocean. I was kinda hoping you’d come down. Were you watching me?”

He walked up and pulled her into his arms. “I was. Hope that’s okay. I didn’t want to interrupt you.” He smiled. “But I sure did like watching.” He leaned down and kissed her lightly, running his tongue over the contours of her full, sweet lips. She moaned softly.

“I like that you were watching,” she whispered.

He grabbed her ass and crushed her against him, increasing the ardor in their kiss. She matched him for a few too-brief seconds, but then she pulled back. “I’m really sorry, love, but I don’t have time to play this morning. I have to get ready for this presentation.”

“I could help you shower . . .”

She laughed and ran her hands up his arms. “*Help* me? Huh. Well, I *do* have those hard to reach places.” He swept her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom.

Later, he lay naked on the bed, propped up against the headboard, and watched her dress for the conference. He’d never seen her dress like this before; it was odd. Even when she taught, she dressed like Lilli, but now she was basically wearing a uniform. Slim black skirt (*that* was nice; it hugged her ass perfectly), black blazer, the light blue t-shirt she’d been wearing when he first went to her house. Plain black flats. Her glasses. She wound her hair into a complicated braid. She still looked beautiful—how could she not?—but she also looked like she could be selling real estate. “Why the getup, babe? Not really your style, is it?”

“Nobody stuffier than a historian, and this is a whole conference of them. They have enough trouble listening to someone like me—a woman, and too young to know anything, as far as they’re concerned. My research is cutting edge enough that they’re going to be looking for ways to attack me. If I wear my Docs, they’ll dismiss me before I open my mouth. At smaller conferences, maybe. They tend to be mellower. But this is a big international conference, and all the asshats come out for these. So, the uniform. When you walk through the hotel today, you’ll see that all the women are dressed just like this.”

“Wait. *Attack* you? What do you mean?”

She chuckled. “Not like you’re thinking. Though the thought of all those old farts throwing down is hilarious. No, I mean verbally. I’m prepared for a whole lot of old men, and some young ones, too, to say shitty things about my work this morning. Maybe about me personally. When they really get going, who knows.”

Opie sat up. “What the hell?”

She sat on the side of the bed and pushed him back against the headboard. “Don’t get all he-man on me, love. It’s part of my world. I’m used to it. I’m prepared for it. I give better than I get. I’ll shut them all down, don’t worry. And then when my talk is over, I’m blowing off the rest of the conference and playing with my favorite people. So I’m good.” She leaned over and kissed him. “But I have to go. I’ll see you when you get back, okay?”

“Okay. Good luck. I love you.”

“I love you. Be safe.”

He laughed. “You too, apparently.” She blew him a kiss and went out.

*

The meet had gone smoothly. Thank God. Few things that had to do with the cartel went as planned. Opie had been a lot more worried about it than he’d let on to Lilli. After months of muling drugs for the Galindos, Opie had learned to expect blood with even the smallest job.

No blood this time, though. And they had a new contact and a conduit that should give them a little bit of distance from the cartel war. Great work in a few hours. Jax called Clay and shared the good news. Then they headed back to San Diego and their old ladies.

It was getting late in the afternoon and summer-warm when they got back to the hotel. Their rooms were empty, but the note Lilli had left him in the morning was lying on the made bed, now with an extra heart. Opie called through the connecting door to Jax: “I think they’re on the beach.”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

They headed down in their jeans and kutties; neither of them was really a beach kind of guy, especially not in unfamiliar territory. They found Lilli and Tara lying on two of the hotel’s chaise lounges. Drinks with spears of fruit were sitting on a table between them. They were lying quietly, maybe napping. Opie grabbed Jax’s arm and they both stopped a few feet short and just took in the sight.

Opie noticed that Tara looked great, but his attention was naturally focused on Lilli. She was wearing that bikini she'd packed. It had a floral pattern in purple, blue and white. It was practically microscopic, mostly string, with a few strategic triangles. Part of him hated that she was out in public wearing it, especially when he wasn't around, but that part of him was silenced by the rest of him, which was really enjoying the view.

"You guys just going to stand there and goggle at us?" That was Tara.

Lilli opened her eyes and shielded them with her hand. "Hey, guys. How'd it go?"

Opie lifted her legs, sat down on her lounge, and laid her legs across his lap. He ran both hands up and down the long, sleek muscles of her thighs. She stretched and flexed and made him think about untying those little strings right here. He groaned a little and turned it into a throat-clearing. "Smooth. How about your thing?"

"Kicked ass. Changed lives. The usual." He grinned. She sat up and put her head on his shoulder. "Missed you."

He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. "Missed you, too, babe." He turned and looked out over the Pacific. The sun was lowering into the horizon. The breeze coming off the water was cool and salty. Lilli was in his arms. For a minute he let himself feel how great it all was.

He looked over at Jax and Tara, who were making out pretty heavily. "So we have the rest of the day to ourselves, right? Do we want to go out?" They looked at him, both a little flushed. Opie laughed. "Or would we rather not?"

Tara smiled. "No, we should go out. See the city. Get some food."

"Food sounds good," Lilli said. "The little wrap things they brought us out here didn't go very far."

They went back to the hotel and cleaned up. Lilli and Opie showered together, but it was all about getting clean. Well, mostly. After he was dressed in clean jeans and a black button-up shirt, he sat in the chair near the balcony door and watched Lilli get ready. He ogled her ass as she bent over, wrapped in a towel, drying her hair with the hotel blow dryer. When it was dry, she tossed her head back and her shiny mass of dark waves cascaded down her back. She leaned back a little and shook her head to let her hair arrange itself; he always found that move incredibly sexy. He was suddenly wishing they were staying in.

Watching her put her clothes on was almost as fascinating as watching her take them off. She knew she had an audience, and she was playing it up for his benefit. She eased a dark pink satin thong up her long legs, shimmying her ass at him she settled it into place. *Damn*. Then a matching bra. She looked over her shoulder and winked at him. He wiggled his eyebrows back. She grabbed a fresh pair of jeans out of her pack and slid into them. They were his favorite pair:

low rise, naturally worn and faded, and as soft as flannel. Fit her like a fucking glove. She pulled on her Docs and straightened the boot cut legs of her jeans over them.

She put on a plain white t-shirt with a deep v-neck that hugged the curves of her breasts. He could vaguely see the tint and shape of her bra underneath. She tucked the shirt in and fed her thick black belt into her jeans.

No makeup. She hardly ever wore it; she never needed it. No jewelry except the ring he'd given her and a crystal-studded leather cuff Tara had given her. He wore way more jewelry than she did. He liked her unadorned—especially around her neck. She, on the other hand, liked his rings and leather and chains. “You ready to go, love?”

He tossed her jacket to her and grabbed his jacket and kutte. “Yep. You going to be warm enough?”

“Sure. If I need to, I'll just cuddle up close with you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I like that plan. Let's go.”

*

Opie woke before dawn, thinking about his kids. Once he realized that sleep was over for him, he sat up against the headboard and mulled. Lilli was sleeping next to him, curled up, her back against his side. She stirred slightly and made a small, sweet moan when he moved, then settled back into sleep. He put his hand on her side and watched her for a few minutes, drawing some peace from her easy rest.

Today they were going to rent a car and drive to Ontario so Lilli could meet his kids. He hadn't seen Kenny and Ellie in over a year. He still called them every week, and sometimes they had good conversations, but mostly everything was strained and awkward. He wasn't looking forward to the day. He wasn't entirely sure why, but he felt resentful that Lilli had pushed so hard to meet them. She *never* pushed him about things that had to do with his life, so just the fact that she had pushed this point meant it was important. And he knew she was right. They were his kids. She would be their stepmother. Of course she should meet them. It wasn't like he'd stopped being their father, even though he wasn't raising them.

He chewed on that for awhile. *Had* he stopped being their father? Had he ever really been their father? He'd been inside for a huge part of their lives, and off being an outlaw for the rest. They were Donna's kids, really. She'd raised them, and now her mother was raising them. Is that why he felt this way? What did it mean that Lilli would be their stepmother? Did it mean anything at all? What would come of this meeting? What if they didn't like her? What if they did? Would it change anything? Would it change everything? *Fuck.*

Would meeting his kids change how Lilli felt about him? Would she judge him more? Would she love him less? Would it change their plans? She was a natural mother. He could see it when he watched her with Abel and Thomas. He could also see how she missed being a mom. Hell, he even regretted that they couldn't have a baby together. What if she wanted the kids to live with them? He couldn't have that. They were safe where they were. *Fuck!*

He couldn't be still anymore. He got out of bed, trying not to disturb Lilli, and yanked on his jeans. He went out onto the balcony. The sea breeze was sharp with chill, but he didn't care. He stood looking out at the ocean, palely luminescent in the waning night. He tried to clear his head, but it was too crowded. Seeing the kids today was a mistake. He was pissed at Lilli for pushing so hard. What right did she have?

Even as these thoughts coalesced, he knew they were petty and unfair. He shoved them back. She had a right. She was his old lady—his fiancée. Of course she had a right. More than that, she was just *right*. But that was what pissed him off, really. Seeing his kids meant facing a lot of shit he'd been keeping to the background. He didn't want to face any of it.

A light came on behind him, and he heard the door slide open. Lilli's arms snaked around his waist. He felt her press her cheek against his back. "Hey love, you okay?"

He took a breath and tamped down the anger he was feeling. "I'm fine. Couldn't sleep."

She shivered and squeezed him gently. "Aren't you cold?"

"No."

She lifted her head, but didn't say anything. Then she sidled around to face him. She was wearing the black shirt he wore last night. "What's up, Opie? Something seems wrong."

He looked over her head at the surf for a moment, then closed his eyes and took a breath. When he looked down at her, he saw the concern in her eyes. He kissed her forehead. "I'm fine, babe. Just thinking about the kids and hoping today goes okay. You should go back to bed—it's way too early to be awake."

"Not without you."

That made him impatient and flared his temper, but he caught himself before he said anything sharp. Instead, he said simply, "Okay," and let her lead him back inside. They settled in bed, Lilli's head pillowed on his chest. She traced her fingers gently over his chest and abdomen until she fell asleep, her hand curled over his heart.

Opie lay there, staring at the ceiling, waiting for dawn to push the dark away.

Chapter 16

Opie pulled the rental Tahoe over and parked it in front of a small single-story house, well-kept but plain. There was a chain link fence around the front yard, and an old Ford LTD wagon, with faux wood panels, parked in the carport. This was Donna's mother's house, Lilli supposed.

She could only suppose, because Opie had barely spoken an entire sentence all morning. She'd tried to talk at first, but he was clearly not in the mood, so she'd just let him be. She knew seeing his kids again was going to be hard. He hadn't said much about it, even before this morning, but she guessed that his guilt for sending them away, and his guilt and melancholy about Donna, were trumping any joy he might feel about seeing them again. She knew that she'd pushed him pretty hard to get him to agree to this, so she wasn't pushing to get him to talk about it.

He killed the engine but just sat there, looking out the windshield, his hands on the wheel. She waited. Finally, he took a breath and said, "Marie—Donna's mother—can't stand me. She's not happy about this visit. I don't know how she's going to act. She might be mean, even in front of the kids. You don't have to come to the door if you don't want to."

Lilli put her hand on his. "I won't take her personally, but what do *you* want me to do?"

"I don't care."

That hurt her feelings, but she didn't think he meant to. He'd been terse like that all morning. She mentally shook it off, but she dropped her hand from his. "I'll come to the door with you, then."

"Let's go." He got out of the truck.

Lilli stayed a couple of steps back when he rang the bell. A dog started yapping furiously as soon as Opie pressed the button. A short, heavysset woman with short, iron-grey hair opened the main door and stared out at them through the metal security door. A puffy little white dog made a ruckus at her feet. "Opie," the woman said.

"Marie. The kids ready?"

"I don't know where you get off, dropping in on their lives after more than a year. I'm the one has to deal with them if you get them all stirred up."

"They're my kids, Marie. I want one day. We had this out already."

"One day to show off their mama's replacement? Real nice. That's her, I expect?"

Lilli stepped up. "My name is Lilli."

"You know this idiot will get you killed, just like he got my baby killed, right? What kind of woman wants his life? I'll tell you what kind: dead. Stupid and dead."

Lilli could see how rigid Opie was. His fists were clenched at his sides and shaking. She took another step forward, putting herself between him and the door. “Well, I think we’re all clear on your feelings. You knew we were coming. You know that you can’t keep Opie from his kids. So your belligerence is all for show. Why don’t you call Ellie and Kenny so they can spend the day with their dad? Then we’ll get out of your hair.”

“Bitch.”

“Back at ya.”

Marie huffed and sputtered, but she turned and yelled, “Kenny! Ellie! Your father’s here!” She turned on Opie. “Don’t you bring them back tore up, asshole.”

Opie said nothing. Lilli stepped back, off the porch.

When the kids came into view, Marie gave them each a hug. “Okay, you two. Be good. Don’t fight. I’ll see you tonight.” She opened the door and held it for them as they passed through. “I want them home by 6:00 for dinner.” She slammed and locked both doors.

Ellie and Kenny stood on the porch, looking awkward. At first, Opie just looked at them. He didn’t speak; he didn’t move. Just as Lilli was thinking she would have to intervene, he squatted down and said, “Hi, guys. I sure missed you.” He held out his arms. Kenny, the younger, went to him right away, and Opie wrapped him tight in one arm, keeping the other out for Ellie. She hesitated for several long seconds and then went into her father’s embrace as well. Lilli walked backwards, toward the street, trying to make a private space for them.

Opie held his children until they got restless, then he stood up and swiped at his eyes. He turned to her and waved her back. As she walked to them, Opie said, “Ellie, Kenny, this is Lilli. I told you about her. We’re going to get married this summer, and I wanted you to meet her first.”

Lilli held out her hand and said, “I’m very glad to meet you.” Kenny shook her hand shyly, but readily. Ellie just looked at her. Lilli dropped her hand and smiled.

Opie cleared his throat. “We thought we’d go see a movie and go for pizza after. How’s that sound?” Kenny nodded. Ellie shrugged. Opie said, “Okay, let’s go then,” and led them to the truck.

*

Opie and Lilli had done some research when they were planning the trip, so they knew there was a pizza/arcade place near a local cineplex, and they’d figured out what movie to see ahead of time. Considering the profound lack of discussion that was happening now, that preparation was an especially good thing. Maybe seeing a movie wasn’t the best bonding opportunity, but it was a good ice breaker and would give them something to talk about afterwards.

That was the plan, anyway. But between Opie's stoicism and the kids' awkward detachment, Lilli thought it unlikely that there would be much talking at any point during this visit. The movie had been fine—some PG-13 thing, kid-oriented but not babyish, and both kids had seemed to enjoy it. Opie let them have what they wanted from the snack bar, and they were animated making their selections, at least. Lilli tried to participate without horning in between Opie and his kids. They mainly ignored her, but that was okay.

They perked up at the pizza place, though. They ordered a large pizza, and the kids got shakes. They started answering with more than one syllable the questions Opie, and sometimes Lilli, asked. Kenny seemed to warm up especially. Ellie stayed guarded but still thawed noticeably as the day progressed.

As the pizza dwindled, Kenny asked if they were going to get to play in the arcade. Opie said of course, and they spent the next three hours playing video games. Opie played with Ellie, Lilli played with Kenny. Opie played with Kenny, too. Ellie wouldn't play with Lilli, but she was willing to go with her to spend her tickets. The ice seemed broken, at least between Opie and his kids. He was still being pretty chilly with her, though. Not so much that the kids would notice, but she sure did.

They walked the kids up to Marie's front door just before 6pm. Opie squatted down to hug them. "I love you guys. You be good for your grandma, okay? I'll call you next week." He kissed them both. Ellie let him go, but Kenny held on tight and resisted when Opie tried to loosen his grip. "Daddy, don't go!" he cried.

Lilli blinked back tears. Opie squeezed him close for a minute. She heard his voice crack when he said, "I'm sorry, son. I can't stay." Kenny still wouldn't let go, and Opie had to pry his arms loose. "C'mon, big man. You need to go in. Your grandma's waiting for you."

Kenny finally stepped back, sniffling. He started to head to the door, but then he stopped and walked to Lilli. He held out his hand. Lilli took it and they shook. "Bye, Lilli. You're pretty." He ran back to the porch. Marie opened the door just then, and the kids went in. Ellie turned back to look at her dad just as Marie closed the door on them. Lilli heard the deadbolt catch.

Opie turned on his heels and walked back to the truck. Lilli had to trot to keep up with him. He gunned the engine and pulled away before she had her seatbelt fastened. He drove the whole way back to the hotel—100 miles—without uttering a word, his hands around the steering wheel in a white-knuckle grip. Lilli kept her trap shut.

*

They turned the truck in with the hotel concierge and went up to their room, the ride in the elevator just as thickly silent as the ride in the truck had been. Opie walked straight through the room to the balcony. He shut the door behind him. He sat down in one of the two lounge chairs out there and looked out over the beach. Lilli stood in the middle of the room and tried to figure out what she should do.

She knew that he wanted space—he was making that abundantly clear—and her gut told her to give it to him. But this felt too big to be left alone. She was sure that it was going to come to a head one way or another, and she'd rather it not happen when she wasn't expecting it. Her gut was screaming at her not to do it, but she didn't feel like she really had a choice. So she psyched herself up and opened the balcony door.

“Opie, love. We need to talk.”

“No, we don't.”

She stood in front of him, obstructing his view of the ocean. “You have to know that things between us all day have been weird. Something's going on. I can try to guess, but it would be better if you told me, don't you think?”

Opie looked up at her. He spoke through a clenched jaw. “I don't want to talk. I don't know if I can control what I would say.”

“The implication of which is that you think you would say something hurtful to me if we talk now. And the implication of that is that you're angry with me. But I don't know why you would be. So we need to talk.”

“You don't know? Really?”

“Really, Opie. I can think of a lot of reasons that you'd be feeling bad right now, but if I did something to make you angry, I'm really at a loss.”

He stood up, towering over her, glaring at her. “All the reasons I'm feeling bad right now? They're because you made me do that today. You forced that whole fucking mess. *You* hurt my kids and left me feeling raw. So yeah, I'm pissed.”

Jesus. Lilli wasn't going to let that slide. “Well, that's a huge load of crap. That's weak, Opie. Deflecting your shit onto me. No way that's fair.”

He grabbed her arms hard enough to bruise and stared at her. He was shaking. She stared back and said, low but with force, “You are on the bleeding edge of the point of no return, Opie. Take your hands off me. If I have to do it, I'm walking, and I'm leaving your ring behind.”

He dropped his hands. “Fuck! *I told you I don't want to fucking talk about this!*” He was really yelling, right in her face.

Jax stepped out onto the balcony next door. “Guys? We good out here?”

Opie answered without turning around. “Not your business, brother.”

Jax looked at Lilli. He raised his eyebrows in query. She said, “It’s cool, Jax. We’re okay. Thanks.” He stood there for a couple of seconds, unconvinced, then went back into his and Tara’s room. He left their balcony door open, though.

Opie looked over his shoulder at the neighboring balcony, then turned back around. “If you still want to talk about this, fine. But let’s take it inside.” Lilli made an “after you” gesture toward the door. She was pretty pissed herself, now.

Back inside, she sat down on the bed. Opie paced. “Okay, Opie. Time for some hard truth, because I think your whole attitude today is bullshit. You say all this is my fault. Why? Because I thought that I should meet your children before I become your wife? Fuck you. I didn’t ask you to change any of the decisions you’ve made about them. I haven’t even ever offered an opinion about the decisions you’ve made about them. I am not trying to put myself between you and them at all. I didn’t ask you to do anything except pay your children a visit and introduce me. How do you think they’d have felt if you’d married me without letting them meet me?”

“You feel bad—I wonder if it’s because you feel like you abandoned them.” Opie charged toward her, then pulled up short. Rage was contorting his face, but she held her ground. “Dude, I swear to fucking God, you have got to calm down.”

“*You don’t get to say shit like that and then tell me to calm down!*” Apparently he was going to substitute volume for violence. Fine. An improvement.

Volume wasn’t Lilli’s style, however. She kept her voice level. “Sure I do. I get to have a conversation with you without worrying that you’re going to fuck us up by trying to hurt me. And by the way, I didn’t say you abandoned your kids. I said I wonder if *you feel like* you did.”

He looked at her, blinking, as he processed the distinction. She could see when some of the fire went out of his fury. She continued, “Look, Opie. I *don’t* think you abandoned your kids. I really have no idea if you made the right call sending them down here to live. They aren’t my kids, and I wouldn’t presume to think I know what’s right for them. I certainly know that the life you lead isn’t conducive to being around the way kids need you to be around. But I’m not going to let you off this hook—I think you sent them away as much to protect yourself as you did to protect them. You wanted to keep them safe, yes—but also, you didn’t want to have the constant worry. Maybe *that’s* why you’re so upset. But, for the right reasons or the wrong ones, *you* made that choice to send your kids away, not me.”

Opie roared. He wheeled around and swept his arm across the desk, clearing it with a loud crash. Jax was pounding on the connecting door within seconds. “Ope! What’s going on? Let me in! Now, or I’m shooting my way in!” Lilli got up from the bed and unlocked the door. Jax pushed through the doorway and put himself between her and Opie. Tara was right there, too. “Lilli, are you okay?”

“I’m okay. Really. I appreciate the concern”—she looked pointedly at Opie, who was breathing heavily and staring at the three of them—“but we’re just having an intense disagreement. No fists have flown, and none will. Promise.”

Jax looked at Opie. “Bro, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but you need to stop and think right now. Do *not* fuck this up.” Opie didn’t respond.

Lilli said, “It’s okay, Jax. You can go.” With another concerned look at her, Jax reluctantly led Tara back to their room. Lilli closed the door. But she left it unlocked.

She walked over to Opie. She didn’t touch him, not yet. “I *am* sorry that the visit stirred all this up for you, and maybe for your kids, too. I’m sorry you’re hurting. I know you love them and want what’s best for them. Maybe you’ve given them that. I don’t know. Either way, it doesn’t change how I feel about you. You’re a wonderful man, Opie. You love well and deeply. I don’t question your decision. I support you. I’ll never ask you to visit them again—and I’ll never get in your way if you want to see them.” Now she touched him, putting a hand on his chest, over his heart.

At first, he just stood there, looking at the floor, still breathing hard. Then he looked up, into her eyes. His eyes were red-rimmed and watery. He grabbed her by the waist and yanked her against him. He clutched her head in his other hand and leaned down to kiss her, hard. She slid her arms around his neck. Now *this* was familiar working-out-pain territory.

He tore her shirt out of her jeans and pulled it up over her breasts. He shoved her bra up. He ripped her belt and jeans open and yanked her jeans down. Lifting her by the waist, he dropped her on the desk he’d just cleared.

It was familiar, yes, but Lilli began to realize that it wasn’t okay. She felt threatened and anxious. When he needed to be rough to come down from some violent Sons confrontation, she understood what he needed, and she knew they were on the same side. That was okay—it was good. What was happening now, though—*they* had been fighting. His anger was directed at her. Whatever he wanted now, they weren’t on the same side. His roughness now felt like an attack.

She pushed on his shoulders. “Opie, no. Stop.” He didn’t. Instead, he pushed her hands clear and clutched her harder, his hand grabbing at her breast.

And then she felt fear. Sitting on the desk with her jeans around her knees, she was way too vulnerable. She had no good leverage. Then he backed off slightly to open his own jeans, and she used the opportunity to raise her bound-up legs. She pushed hard with her hands and kicked out with her legs and knocked him back. “Opie! Fucking STOP!”

He froze. He looked bewildered. “What’s wrong?”

Shaken, she got up from the desk and pulled her clothes back together. “I don’t want this. Rough is one thing; angry is something else, and I don’t want it. I told you to stop.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her hands on her shoulders. “You scared me.”

She might as well have slapped him, he flinched so hard. “I—I didn’t—no! Lilli!” He looked stunned and hurt at first; then, as if he were playing back the past few minutes in his head, his

expression changed to something like shame. He reached for her, then just dropped his hand. "My God. I'm sorry," he whispered.

There was a lot going through Lilli's head just then, snarling into an incomprehensible knot. She didn't know what to do with his apology, but she could see his anguish plainly. She was scared and confused about what had happened tonight, but she didn't have the energy to figure it out. So she put her arms around him and said only, "Okay."

He wrapped his arms tight around her and kissed her head. "I *love* you, Lilli. I'm so sorry I scared you."

Again she said, "Okay."

Then they got into bed and curled up together, early though it was, both of them glad to close the book on the day.

*

Opie fell asleep almost immediately; Lilli assumed he was exhausted from the emotion and stress of the day. She, on the other hand, lay awake for a long time and slept only fitfully when she finally did. Opie was a complicated guy. Every time she thought she'd come to really understand him, he'd peel back another layer and there'd be a new puzzle to solve. She'd expected his visit with his kids to be difficult, but nothing about the way he'd talked with her about Ellie and Kenny before, nothing in the way they'd discussed the visit itself, not even his reluctance, had forewarned her that he'd deflect his inner conflict onto her. In fact, his driving need to protect her made this aggression toward her even more confusing. So she lay awake and factored the new information into her understanding of this man she loved.

Despite the sleeplessness, she sat up not long after dawn with the intent to take a run. It would clear her head and shake off the malaise of the long night. She looked over at Opie. He was sleeping on his back, his arms curled over his head. He'd kicked the covers away, but this night he'd slept in his boxers. She took in the view, admiring the broad, inked expanse of his muscular chest, the regular ridges of his abdomen, the swell of his biceps against his face. He was so fucking gorgeous.

His face was relaxed; he seemed at ease. Not for the first time, she thought about how rarely his face looked so smooth and calm when he was awake. He looked years younger when sleep allowed him some respite from his cares. She wanted to be the source of that respite when he was awake. She didn't want to add to his worries. She knew she did; just by being there for him to love, she'd added to his worries. She wished she could solve that conundrum, but their love caused him pain.

The rose and the thorn.

She leaned over and lightly kissed his bearded cheek. Then she turned the covers aside and slid carefully out of bed.

*

Lilli ran barefoot along the surf for about half an hour, then turned around and ran back. She was warm and loose and invigorated when she stopped, but she was no closer to working through the tangle in her head. She walked a couple of steps into the water and stood looking out into the blank expanse of sea, the tide rolling out, swirling around her ankles, the sand under her feet shifting gently.

She loved Opie. A life without him seemed unfathomably empty. She knew how much he loved her. But they were bumping up against troubles that they could no longer pretend to ignore. Buried stuff they'd been content to leave underground was rising up between them.

Some part of him had wanted to hurt her last night. That was not okay. She couldn't let it be okay. It was a line she *could not* let him cross.

But what did that mean? Were they over? He hadn't crossed the line last night. He'd come right up to it, it had been close and she had been scared, but he hadn't crossed it. Okay, then. Did that mean she was willing to tolerate the threat, as long as he didn't follow through?

That didn't feel right. She didn't want to be in a relationship in which there was even a thought that a fight could become violent. She shouldn't have to be on self-defense alert to speak her mind with the one person she loved and trusted above all others. They already danced around in enough grey area. Every time he came home upset from some Sons thing and needed rough sex, they danced in the grey. She was happy to let him have what he needed. But she needed a very clear boundary, and they apparently hadn't established one. Last night proved that.

She understood, too, that Opie fought with his fists in just about every other relationship in his life. Almost any conflict with a Son, big or small, was resolved with some kind of violence. Expecting him to control that when he fought with her meant expecting him to build a whole new response just for her. Especially since their fights came up from such dark places.

She suddenly realized that she had no idea whether he'd ever hit Donna. Until last night she would have said with utter confidence that he absolutely had not. She was still almost certain he hadn't. She knew little about Donna—she was part of his past about which he didn't volunteer and she didn't pry—but she couldn't see the gentle, sensitive man she knew beating a woman he loved.

So, then, had there really been a risk last night? Would he have controlled himself even without her promise hanging over his head that she would leave him?

And how did the gentle, sensitive man she knew match up with the outlaw he was? He spent almost every day waist-deep in real violence. Like action-movie violence. He'd killed. Repeatedly. To save his brothers, or his loved ones, or himself, he'd killed without a second thought. Was she really okay with that?

Yes. She really was. It was the only question she'd asked herself this morning that she had a ready answer for. What he did as a Son really didn't factor at all in her feelings for him or her desire to bind herself to him. It never had. Hell, since the Calaveras attack, she was a killer, too, not to put too fine a point on it. And he *was* gentle and sensitive. He was compassionate and empathetic. No question. The man she loved was a kind, old soul.

As she untangled the strands of her thoughts, she understood that the problem was that the outlaw and the old soul *didn't* match up. He swallowed whole all the guilt and conflict he felt about the things he had to do as a Son, the things that had happened because of the Sons, and let it eat him from the inside out. He brought it home. He brought it to her. That's why the dark moods and rough nights. It was why he was so anxious, so protective, and always felt so goddamn guilty about everything. It was why his love for her caused him pain and fear.

Could such a love be a good thing? Could what they had *not* be a good thing?

She hadn't moved, but the tide had rolled out, and now she was a couple of feet from the water's edge. She heard the familiar, faint jingle of his wallet chain and looked over her shoulder as he came up behind her and wrapped her in his arms. She grabbed his arms, and he pressed a kiss to the side of her head. "Please don't leave me," he whispered.

Without warning, she dropped her head and started to cry.

"Lilli?" She heard panic rise up in his voice. She was crying too hard to speak; she just shook her head. He turned her and put his hands around her face. He tried to lift her head to look at him, but she resisted. "Oh, God, Lilli! No! I'm so sorry. Please. I love you. Please." He was crying now, too.

She leaned her forehead against his chest and bawled. Until she started crying she hadn't realized how close she was to ending it. But the realization had now come upon them both. She felt his desperation in the way his hands stroked her back. She felt his chest shaking from his own sobs.

"Please, please, please," he whispered, over and over. She loved him. She loved him so much. She didn't want a life without him. She just didn't. She didn't want the life she had before she met him. She wanted the life he offered her, the life he'd already given her. She wanted the tumult and the passion. She wanted the joy and the pain. Her love for him filled her up. She loved the outlaw *and* the old soul. Maybe they didn't match up, but they were inextricable halves of the whole man. He deserved her trust—the trust that he wouldn't hurt her, and the trust that he knew his own love best.

Still crying, she slid her arms up and around his neck and clutched him close. "I love you. I love you. I can't leave. I love you."

Gasping, he pulled her tight against him, lifting her off her feet. He kissed her neck, her cheek, her lips. His knees buckled, and they went down together to the sand. He lay on her and kissed her deeply. She could taste his tears. She slid her hands into the beard on his cheeks and kissed him back.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “I will make last night up to you. I promise, Lilli. I’m so sorry.”

She put her fingers over his mouth. “Hush. We need to talk, but later. I don’t want to talk now. Right now, I just want you to hold me.” He sat back on his knees and pulled her up. Then he settled on the wet sand and shifted her to sit between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her again. She folded her arms over his and lay back into his embrace. They sat like that, quietly, facing the Pacific, his head resting lightly against hers, for a long time.

Hard as it was to shake off a night and a morning like they’d had, Lilli knew that Jax and Tara were waiting for them in the hotel. Today was supposed to be their one real vacation day. So, eventually, she sat up in Opie’s embrace and turned a bit to face him. “We should head back in. Jax and Tara are going to be looking for us.”

Opie looped her ponytail around his hand. “You still want to go out with them today?”

“I do. I think it would be good. How about you?”

He looked at her closely. “Are we okay?”

She combed her hand through his hair, pulling it back from his face. “We do need to talk. There’s some stuff that needs attention. But I think yes. We’re okay.” She pulled his head down so their foreheads met. “And we need a good day. Don’t you think?”

“I do. I love you, Lilli.” He kissed her gently. She stood up and held out her hand to him. He took it and stood up. They walked hand in hand back to the hotel.

*

It was a good day. They took the ferry to Catalina Island and spent the day there. They walked around the island. The women convinced the guys to tolerate browsing in some of the funky shops. They ate. They drank. They laughed. They played. Opie was attentive and accommodating all day, rarely leaving her side, his hands on her almost constantly. Then, past dark, they ferried back. They stood in the bow of the boat, Lilli and Tara against the railing, their old men behind, encircling them. Water and wind whipped around them, but Lilli didn’t mind the cold. Nestled with Opie, she was feeling calm and protected. She’d just about packed up her cares from the morning. Yeah, yeah. She knew they still needed to talk. But just now, all felt right with the world.

It was late when they got back to the hotel. The plan was to be up and on the road early in the morning. An early ride was an easier ride, and Tara and Jax were anxious to get back to their boys. They said good night and retired to their respective rooms.

As soon as Lilli locked their door, Opie turned her and pressed her against it. He leaned down and kissed her, his tongue insistent in her mouth. She pulled off his beanie and grabbed handfuls

of his hair, holding his head to her. He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her, sliding her up the door, until her face was level with his. She wrapped her legs around him.

They stayed like that, kissing passionately, for a long moment. Then Opie pulled away and gently unwrapped her legs, setting her back down. Lilli whimpered and opened her eyes. She tried to pull him back into their kiss, but he held her off. He was breathing hard, but his resolve was written on his face. "I want to talk now, babe. I want us to get clear of it." Reluctantly, Lilli nodded.

Opie took her hand in his and led her to the bed. They sat down on it, facing each other. For a while, neither spoke. Lilli didn't know where to start, or if she should be the one to start. She no longer was entirely sure what she wanted to say. Right now, the idea that she'd almost left him seemed absurd.

Finally, Opie cleared his throat and said, "Why do you love me, Lilli?"

"What?" The question shocked her. She knew he knew—he had to know. What was he after?

"What good do I bring you? What is there in me for you to love?"

She sat forward and put her hand on his cheek. "Opie, Jesus."

He took her hand from his face and held it. "I mean it. I'm not digging for compliments. I really don't understand. I bring nothing but blood and pain into your life. There's always something I have to apologize for. What could you love?"

Did he really not know? The thought broke her heart, and her eyes welled. She was quiet for a minute, swallowing back her tears, as she sorted out how to answer him so he'd believe her.

"You bring me *so much*, Opie. God. You make me so happy. What is there in you to love? Where do I start?"

"I love your heart. It's big and true. It's been battered, and yet you still love so hard. I feel your love for me in your look, your touch, your words." He turned away from her then, maybe thinking about the night before, and she grabbed his beard and turned him back to face her.

"I love your courage and your strength. You don't back down. You do what you need to do. Without a second thought, you would put yourself in front of any danger to protect your family. You do it all the time.

"I love your mind. You are always thinking; you're always seeing and making sense of things. You help me see things I would have missed. I love your sense of humor. It's quiet and wry and doesn't demand a lot of attention. And, God, I love your smile and your laugh.

"I love your stillness, your depth. I love that we can be quiet together without feeling like we have to fill every second just so it's full.

“And I love your body and its power. Your hands on me, your body against mine, the way you feel under my hands, between my thighs, inside me—God, love, just the thought of you makes my eyes roll back.” He leaned in and kissed her.

They were having the talk, so she might as well say it all. She whispered against his lips. “There are some things I hate, too, Opie.” He pulled back, brow furrowed. “I hate your pain. I hate that you still think you have to feel it alone. I hate your fear, and the way it keeps you from seeing when things are good. I hate your guilt and the way it feeds your fear. And I really hate that our love doesn’t ease your burden. You told me when you asked me to marry you that I bring you peace. It doesn’t seem like that’s true.”

He pulled her close again and kissed her forehead. “It is, Lilli. It is. The only time I ever feel good is when I’m with you. There’s so much . . . I don’t know . . . noise, I guess . . . in my head all the time. But when I’m with you, everything goes quiet.

“I know why I love you. Loving you is easy. Everything about you is beautiful. You’ve brought so much good to me. You accept me and my life. You ask almost nothing of me. But I ask so much of you. And then I turn around and threaten you. All I want in my whole life is to love you and protect you, and twice now—*fucking twice*—I’ve been violent toward you. I don’t know how it happened. It’s not who I am—or it isn’t who I was. I don’t understand myself. I don’t know what to do. I’m ashamed. I’m scared.”

He laced his fingers with hers and looked down at them in his lap. He spoke the next bit softly, almost under his breath. “I know why you would leave me. The thought of losing you—” he stopped, swallowed hard. “But I would let you go, if that’s what you want. I was scared and selfish this morning.”

Her tears had spilled over by now. She squeezed his hands. “It’s *not* what I want. I was thinking about it this morning. I was trying to think through everything that happened last night. And I’d almost decided to go.” His hands clenched around hers. “But I can’t. I don’t want to. I love you—I love *us*—too much. I don’t want to be without you. I’m not leaving, Opie.

“What scares me more than anything else is I think I’d stay even if you did hurt me.” He winced at that. “I don’t want to lose myself so much in love that I become someone who will just take whatever gets thrown at me. I know I shouldn’t have pushed you to talk last night when you didn’t want to. I wish I hadn’t, and I’m really sorry. But I don’t want to become someone who can’t speak out of fear it could set you off. I know I can defend myself, but I shouldn’t need to think about that with you. I was trying to decide this morning if I could live with the threat that you might hurt me as long as you didn’t actually do it. My answer is no. I don’t want to live like that.

“But I *would* live with it because it’s you, and I don’t want to live without you. That scares me. I guess I don’t understand myself either.” She had to stop talking now; it was getting hard to form words.

They were both quiet for a long time. Finally, Opie said, “I don’t know what to do, Lilli. I can’t ask you to trust me. I can’t promise. I broke that promise already. I hate that I can’t even give you that. I can only tell you that I *never, never* want to hurt you. The thought of *anyone* hurting you makes me crazy. The thought that it could be *me*? Jesus. I can’t even deal.”

He lifted her head and wiped her tears with the backs of his fingers. “So where does that leave us, babe?”

She grabbed his beard again. “I’m not leaving. I love you. I want you. I want to be in your life. I want to be your wife. So I trust you.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“That’s for me to decide.” She pulled him close and kissed him. After a moment, he deepened the kiss and leaned forward, pressing her down to the bed. She threaded her fingers into his hair and held him to her as their tongues danced.

Opie pulled back after a few minutes and looked down at her. He just looked, saying nothing, his green eyes serious and deep. Finally, Lilli asked, “What is it, love?”

He nuzzled her cheek. “I love you so much, Lilli. I want to give you a good life. I want to take care of you. I want to make you happy. I want to be the kind of man you deserve.”

Lilli caressed his face, tracing her fingers over the curves of his cheeks, the thick beard over his jaw, the lush swell of his lower lip, the straight line of his nose, the heavy ridge of his brow. Then she said, “A life with you is a good life. You do take care of me.” She smiled. “Sometimes more care than I’m ready for, in fact. Loving you makes me happy. And you are the only man I want, so you *are* the man I deserve.”

She took hold of his beard and peered into his eyes. “Trust *me* enough to know that’s all true. Trust my love, Opie. Let me love you. Let me be strong for you. Let me be the woman you deserve.”

“Oh, Lilli!” He dropped his head, resting quietly for a moment in the crook of her shoulder. She wrapped her arms across his back and held him. Then she felt his lips against her collarbone, kissing and sucking. He kissed along out to the end of her shoulder and back, then up her neck, across her jaw, to her lips. He stopped and just looked at her again, and in his eyes she could see.

They were on the same side again, where they belonged. She raised her head and pressed her mouth to his.

Later, they both slept deeply and with ease, wound in each other’s embrace.

Chapter 17

Opie wiped his face with his discarded t-shirt and sat down. He needed a break. It was only the end of April, and it wasn't even noon, but already the weather was hot. They were working in Lilli's garden. She'd decided she wanted to create a new little nook back here, and he'd volunteered to put in the stone path to it. It was hot, backbreaking work, but they were together, and he loved the intimacy of gardening with her, working on what had become their home, even though he hadn't yet officially moved in.

He didn't think the garden would ever really be *theirs*, but that was okay. It seemed more obviously an extension of Lilli than any other space. He was still amazed by what she'd made back here. The yard was large, much deeper than wide, but even so it seemed impossible that so much could be going on. She had a good-size herb and vegetable garden. An archery range. A little gazebo built for two. A fountain. And meandering paths to all of that plus several private little nooks, each with a bench or an Adirondack chair. Everything was rimmed or filled or draped with flowers, flowers, flowers. Back here, it was possible to forget that she had neighbors, that there was a world at all beyond these leafy borders. It was breathtaking. It was magical.

He sat now on a stone bench and watched her work. She was turning over soil for the new flower bed. She was wearing ratty, yard-work clothes—tattered cutoffs and a faded, almost transparent old sleeveless t-shirt—but she still managed to look seriously sexy. She had worked up a sweat. She had her hair caught up in a messy knot on the back of her head, and lots of strands had come loose to stick to her face and neck. The muscles in her arms and shoulders and legs were glistening. Her shirt was clinging to her. Her cutoffs were really short, and he could see the swell of her ass every time she leaned into the shovel. *Damn.*

Things had been really good between them—maybe better than ever—since San Diego. After they'd gotten back home, he'd opened up a lot about his kids. It was the first time he'd ever talked in detail to anyone about his decision to send them to live with Marie, and in talking it out with Lilli he'd come to understand it more himself. He was still sure he'd made the right choice. There was just too much risk and upheaval in his life, and he wanted better for them. But in talking to Lilli he'd come to understand that he'd been living in a kind of parental limbo since they'd gone, feeling guilty even though he felt it was the right choice, and afraid to even think about his kids too much and have to deal with the guilt. Lilli was right—in a lot of ways *he* was better off, too, because he didn't have to worry that they'd get caught in his crossfire. With Marie, they had a consistency that he could never have provided them. And Marie loved them. She hated him, but she loved them. They were in good hands.

And, honestly, he didn't know how to be their father. He hadn't had a chance to learn how. Finally facing that gave him a chance to come to terms with it.

Though it was one of the first things he loved about her, he thought maybe Lilli's reluctance to pry, her willingness to leave him to his secrets, wasn't always such a great thing. She accepted him and respected his privacy, and she just assumed he would tell her what she needed to know. But his habit was introspection. He didn't really know how or what or when to disclose anything.

So they'd fallen into a pattern in which they came up against some huge obstacle before he'd be able to talk about his past. It worried him.

Lilli was much the same. She didn't disclose much, either, except under duress. But she didn't have the monsters in her closet that he did. Her secrets didn't lurk in dark corners, lying in wait for him the way his did for her. It made him sick to think that he'd threatened her. *More than once.*

Since San Diego, though, he thought all the big monsters had been chased away. Donna, his kids, his life with the Sons, all of that was in the open now. It helped him a lot to have someone who was on his side, and only his side, to talk to about it all, someone who could handle what he had to talk about. It helped him even more to know that she still really didn't judge him or fear him, that she loved him for exactly who he was. He'd never known real unconditional love before. Learning to trust that was a long road.

"Hey, slacker. I thought you were going to help me back here." Opie roused from his musings to find Lilli standing next to him, smiling, leaning on her shovel. He hooked a finger into one of her belt loops and pulled her between his legs. She dropped the shovel.

"Sorry, babe. Just taking a break." He ran his hands over her hips and up under her shorts to cup her ass and squeeze.

"You were like a thousand miles away. Everything okay?"

He lifted the hem of her shirt and kissed her firm, flat belly. She tasted of earth and sweat and the sweetly musky flavor that was just her. He ran his tongue across her taut skin, tasting her fully. "Everything is fantastic." He undid her shorts.

She chuckled, low and sexy, and wiggled her hips to let the tattered denim drop to the ground. No underwear. He opened his jeans with one hand and pulled himself free. She kicked off her garden clogs, slid her work gloves off, and put her hands on his shoulders, balancing herself as she straddled him, her legs over the back of the bench. He held himself steady while she settled on him, sliding down his shaft. She shivered a little and closed her eyes when she was fully seated.

She flexed her hips, and he groaned. "Ah, yeah, babe." He ran his hands up her thighs and around to her ass, clutching her close. He leaned in and suckled her collarbone, savoring the salty tang of her. He felt her hands on his ponytail, pulling the band out. She wove her fingers into his hair. Then she started to move.

It was a while before they got back to work.

*

They headed to the clubhouse in the late afternoon. The guys were playing poker—which meant that the women were expected to cook. Opie knew that, theoretically, Lilli minded the

expectation, but he also knew that, practically, she liked to cook, she liked the guys' hearty appreciation of her cooking, and she liked hanging out at the clubhouse. Usually, she made a little fuss, just for show, and then allowed herself to enjoy it.

She also liked to play poker, but, again, she was willing to concede that she'd shown these guys up enough on their own turf. She'd come over and sit on his lap and watch for awhile every now and then, but she didn't ask to play. Opie got a kick out of watching her political and family sensibilities wrestle it out on days like this.

The bigger issue was Gemma, who was queen of the clubhouse and had trouble making room in the kitchen for another cook. And here, Lilli wasn't so ready to compromise. Opie stayed clear, as did all the guys, but sometimes he worried about leaving those two alone in a room full of sharp objects. Tara wasn't much of a cook, so she just chopped what they told her to chop and kept her head down. Tara had her own tensions with Gemma, and they ran much deeper than deciding who was in charge of a meal.

This time, things seemed pretty calm back there, and now the clubhouse was redolent with the aromas of oregano and garlic. Supper was going to be spaghetti and meatballs, fresh garlic bread, the works. The more aromatic the air, the less focused on their cards the guys got. They were ready for a supper break. Which was okay by Opie, since he was losing his shirt so far.

He felt Lilli's hands on his shoulders. "Okay, boys. You ready to eat after this hand?"

Before she finished her sentence, Ratso, who'd been at the bar and had happened to look up at the security monitor, yelled, "Clay!" They all heard the squeal of tires as a van careened onto the lot.

The Sons leapt up from the poker table just as a storm of automatic gunfire strafed the clubhouse. *Lilli!* Opie spun around, grabbed her, and dropped to the floor, covering her with his body, holding her down. The gunfire kept going, strafing back and forth, tearing through the windows and tearing apart the clubhouse. He pulled his gun out of its holster. "Stay down, babe. Please stay down." He got to his hands and knees and crawled toward the door, bullets and glass raining around him. He heard Lilli yell, "Opie, no!" He kept going.

He crawled up to Jax, and they came up into squats just as the gunfire subsided. They stood up and ran to the door. Jax yanked the door open and they burst out just as the van was turning around and screeching away. A line of Sons fired into the van. As it made a sharp turn out of the compound, a body fell out the open side door. They ran to it.

They pulled the body into the compound and ripped his shirt off to check his ink. Lobo. Fucking goddamn cartel. Raining bullets on their loved ones. Again.

. . . And there were the sirens. Fucking great. Since Unser had retired, dealing with law had gotten much more complicated.

Opie ran back into the clubhouse to check on Lilli. She was already helping Gemma clean up. She didn't look hurt. Thankfully, despite the destruction, it looked like no one had gotten hurt, though Tara was circulating to check everyone out. Then Lilli turned around, and he saw that her sleeve was soaked with blood.

He ran to her. "Lilli!" He gently took her arm. "You're hurt. Let me see. Jesus, they fucking shot you!"

She pulled her arm away. "No, Opie. I'm okay. I just got cut by some flying glass. Tara's going to fix me all up. You're okay, right?"

He kissed her. "I'm fine. Not a scratch."

"Christ. That was some scary shit."

"I know, babe. I'm sorry." He wrapped her in his arms, being careful of her wound, and held her tight. She hugged him back with her good arm. Tara gestured at him to bring Lilli. "Tara wants you." He led her over.

Tara had her sit on a table and lifted her arm. "I need you to take your shirt off so I can get to the wound."

Opie looked around at all the guys and shook his head. Lilli smiled and said, "Just cut the sleeve away, Tara. Shirt's ruined anyway."

Jax called over, "Ope! Roosevelt wants your statement." He saw what was happening. "Is she okay?"

He wasn't leaving until Lilli was seen to. "Yeah. I'll be there in a minute." Jax nodded and went back out.

Tara pulled Lilli's sleeve off. She had a bloody gash across her upper arm. Opie's heart raced. He knew it wasn't bad, she'd be fine—she was fine—but still, she'd been hurt on his watch.

Tara handed him a thick padding of gauze. "I need to flush the wound, make sure there's no glass fragments in it. Hold this on her arm, right under it." He did, and Tara used a big syringe and squeezed some kind of liquid into the cut. It bubbled in the open wound. Lilli hissed but held still. "Fuck me. That's unpleasant."

The gauze Opie was holding soaked red. He took a deep breath. Blood didn't bother him—which was a very good thing, considering his life. But he was having a lot of trouble watching Lilli bleed.

Tara prodded carefully at the wound with a long tweezers. Lilli's eyes were closed, and he could tell by the thin line of her lips that all this was painful, but she was still and stoic.

Tara put the tweezers down. “Okay. It’s clean, and it doesn’t look too bad, actually. It’s not super deep. I want to suture it up so you don’t end up with much of a scar, though.”

“Alrighty.” Lilli looked at Opie. “Love, you look a little pale. Go ahead and talk to the sheriff. I’m in good hands here.”

He stood indecisively for a second, until Lilli raised her eyebrows and gestured toward the door. “Scoot,” she said. He smiled a little, tossed the bloody gauze he was still holding onto Tara’s pile of medical waste, kissed Lilli on the forehead, and went outside.

Giving a statement doesn’t take long when you have no intention of telling the cops anything, but he stood with the Sons afterward and talked vaguely about what had happened. They wouldn’t talk with any clarity or specificity until after the compound was clear. And that would be hours, so Clay called church for the morning.

When he went back in, Tara was taping a bandage to Lilli’s arm. “If you behave yourself and take it easy on your workouts, we can take those out in about a week, and hopefully you won’t have a scar at all in no time.” She looked at Opie. “Watch her—don’t let her do something stupid and pull her sutures.”

Opie laughed. “You assume I have any control over her, Tara. You know better than that.”

Lilli coughed. “Sitting right here, people. Sitting right here.” She jumped off the table. “Can we go home now?”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.” He stopped. “You going to be okay to ride with me?”

“As long as you don’t plan to lay your bike down and drag my arm over the pavement, I’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

*

She held onto him with only her good arm, so he took the ride easy. He got her home and led her inside. He could tell she was getting impatient with his attention, but he could also see that her arm was hurting, so he didn’t care much about her impatience.

She went to change out of her bloody clothes and wash up. He started to follow, but she turned and leveled a pointed look at him, so he stopped and let her handle that on her own. He called from the kitchen, “You want to watch TV or a movie or something?”

“Sounds good. Whatever you want. Would you get me a drink, though? Tequila, maybe?”

“Absolutely.” He poured them both a couple of deep glasses and went to wait for her in the living room.

They'd rearranged the room a bit, so that there was a clear sightline from the couch to the TV. Lilli had had it arranged like a single person, so that there was only one chair—what he now knew to be her Eames chair—with a good sightline. They didn't watch a lot of TV, but it was one of his favorite things: a quiet evening, Lilli curled up with him on the couch, a couple of drinks, a fire when the weather was cool. No matter how nuts things were outside this house, he was always able to find some ease inside it, especially when they were just normal like that.

She came into the room, dressed in one of his t-shirts. As far as he could tell, that was all. She settled next to him on the couch, her legs curled under. He handed her her drink and put his arm around her. She settled against his side. "So, what are we watching?"

"I was thinking maybe some Bogart. *The Big Sleep*? Or *To Have or Have Not*?"

"Or both. But let's start with *To Have or Have Not*."

It was her favorite. He queued it up and they settled in for the evening. Opie could feel his body relax, as if dimmer switches were being turned down all over him.

About an hour in, Opie noticed that Lilli was a little fidgety, moving her hurt arm around gingerly. He paused the movie. "You okay, babe?"

"Yeah. The Novocain or whatever Tara shot me up with has worn off, I guess. It's not the cut that hurts so much as all the little holes she poked in me sewing it up. I'm fine, though. Just feeling a little whiny."

"Can I do anything?"

"Nope. Just be here with me. All I need. Well, and maybe some more tequila." He kissed her on the cheek and went to refill their glasses.

When they started *The Big Sleep*, Lilli had finished her second glass of tequila and was lying with her head in Opie's lap. Fifteen minutes into the movie, he looked down to find her sleeping. He turned the volume down low and stayed put, not disturbing her. He didn't really watch any more of the movie, though. He watched her sleep and thought about things.

Here in the calm of the living room, Lilli in his lap, he could think about what had happened. In deference to her, he'd forced back the stress and panic he'd felt having her in the middle of yet another attack on the clubhouse. But she was asleep now, and he was calmer, and he needed to think.

He just didn't know how to keep her safe. The clubhouse was supposed to be safe. Hell, *Charming* was supposed to be safe. Loved ones and innocents had always been off limits in the various scuffles and turf wars they'd had with other gangs and MCs. The cartel changed all of that. He knew how she felt about his need to protect her, but he didn't know how not to need it. He loved her. He wanted her in his life. His life was violent. He wanted to protect her from that. He couldn't. There wasn't a place in that equation for her to be safe and him to be calm.

He thought about what his dad had said earlier in the year: that whether or not he was in her life, he couldn't control her safety. He knew that was true. He knew it was how Lilli felt, too. He just didn't know how to make himself believe it. Seeing her bleed today—because of him, because of the Sons—that was hard. Thank God she wasn't badly hurt. He didn't know what he'd do if she ever were—or, God, if something worse happened.

He wasn't working anything out; he was only working himself up. He had to stop. He closed his eyes and took a couple of long, slow breaths. He looked down at Lilli's beautiful sleeping face. He combed his fingers through her silky hair. She moaned quietly in her sleep, snuggling deeper into his lap.

He couldn't lose her. He couldn't lose her even to keep her safe. Maybe it was selfish. Or maybe Lilli and his pop were right, and it didn't matter. But he loved her. He needed her. *She* mattered. She was his.

He turned off the TV, then eased out from under her and stood up. He picked her up from the couch and carried her, cradled in his arms, to bed. She barely stirred.

*

He woke up in daylight. Lilli was still sleeping, her back tucked against his chest. He didn't think either of them had moved all night—in fact, his arm, the one she was lying on, was thoroughly numb. He carefully stretched and flexed his hand, trying to bring some life back into it without disturbing her.

She stirred and pressed back against him. Well, some parts of his anatomy were feeling plenty lively. He pulled her even closer, being careful of her hurt arm. He kissed the back of her neck and slid his hand up under the t-shirt she was wearing. That was all she was wearing, and it was huge on her, so he had easy access to her whole body. He ran his hands all over her, caressing her legs, her back, her ass, her belly. She began to wake up, emerging slowly from her deep sleep. He cupped her breast in his hand and tweaked her nipple. She gasped, and he knew she was finally awake.

“Morning, babe. How's your arm?” He slid his hand between her legs. She was wet.

“Mmm. What arm? Oh. Fine. Whatever. Don't care. Don't stop.” She shifted her legs, giving him better access.

“Oh, I won't.” He slid his fingers inside her. She rolled back against him, freeing up his numb arm to fold around her. He shook out his hand—*ouch*—and, when it would move, he took her breast in it. She gasped at the dual stimulation and reached her arm up to grab his head. She hissed when the stitches stretched as her bicep flexed. “Be careful, babe,” he whispered. “Put your arm down. Let me do the work.”

She brought her arm down and lifted her leg, winding it around his, opening herself to him. He bit down on her shoulder as his hands tweaked at her breasts and rubbed tight, heavy circles on her clit. He loved the feel of her under his hands as she writhed. It was only a matter of minutes before she was keening, her hips rocking against his hand, her ass rubbing against his cock. She was driving him crazy. As soon as she came down, he grabbed her thigh, bending her leg up against her belly. He pushed into her, and she cried out, her back arching.

Jesus, she felt so fucking good. He'd been inside her hundreds of times by now—he could count on his hands the number of days they hadn't had sex at *least* once. He'd had her every which way. And still the sensation of sliding into her was as intense and supremely pleasurable as the first time. He had to pause, holding her tight against him to keep her still, while he got hold of himself. She flexed her hips anyway, and clamped her muscles down on him. *Fuck*. He gasped and began to move, holding his palm firmly against her belly, trying to slow her down. He wanted to go slow and easy. He wanted to love her, not fuck her. But she was fighting him, trying to move, already looking to increase the pace.

He kissed her neck and whispered in her ear. "Lilli. Relax, babe. I want to take some time." She sighed and settled down. "That's my girl. Let me feel you for awhile." He slid slowly back and then pushed slowly in. She moaned. He kept a steady pace, moving slowly and pushing deeply, for a long time, until she was panting and whimpering, and the pressure at the base of his cock was almost unbearable. He nibbled at her ear and asked, "You ready, babe?"

"Oh, God, yes. Please, Opie." He slid his hand between her legs again and rubbed hard on her clit and doubled, no, tripled his pace, pushing into her hard and fast now. She bucked against him, thrust for thrust. They came together with a scream and a howl.

After a few moments to catch her breath, Lilli kissed his hand. "Damn, you're good at that."

He chuckled, "I'm not the only one. Your arm okay?"

"I forgot about it." She moved it around, testing it. "Yeah. A little stiff. But not bad. Thanks, by the way."

"For what?"

"Not freaking out yesterday. You were very chill about the whole thing. It was great."

There wasn't any point in telling her what had gone through his mind last night. He kissed the side of her head. "I'm trying, anyway."

"I appreciate it. I love you."

"I love you, babe." He held her tight and held his tongue.

PART FOUR: SUMMER

Chapter 18

Lilli lay on her stomach in her garden, propped up on her elbows. An old quilt was spread under her. She was wearing a red bikini and enjoying some sun. It was warm-going-on-hot, the California sun was beaming, and she was surrounded by flora and fauna. She had a good book. She felt pretty damn good.

The last six months had been bizarre. The fire at Happy's. Two different attacks on the clubhouse. Kozik and Miles both dead. All of it was bound up with drugs and the cartel in one way or another. But in the past few weeks, since the last clubhouse attack, things had calmed down some. Opie had told her that the way things were on a calm day now was still unusually intense compared to the way things had been before they'd gotten involved with the Galindos, but this way was all Lilli had ever known with the Sons, so it seemed calm enough to her right now.

She and Opie were getting married in about a month and a half. They weren't planning an elaborate wedding; a simple affair was perfect for them. Lilli didn't have family or friends except, now, Opie and the Sons, so they were just going up to the cabin and getting married by the lake, with all the Sons and the various MC associates in attendance—there was a surprising number of bikers who would be offended not to be invited. Tara and Jax were standing up with them. There'd be cake and a party. Of course, with that crowd, the end of the night would be rowdy as hell, but still she and Tara had spent several delightful weekends shopping for dresses and a few trimmings to distinguish this from the usual drunken SAMCRO shindig. Plus, she wanted to be a pretty bride.

So she lay on the cool ground of her garden, the babble of the small fountain behind her keeping her amiable company, thinking about wedding dresses and weddings and family and the hard left turn her life had taken since she'd met Opie. She wasn't actually reading, she realized. She closed her book and slid it away, laying her head on the quilt and closing her eyes.

She was dozing lightly, the sounds of water and bees and birds lulling her peacefully, the sun and a cool breeze on her back, when she heard Opie's Dyna coming up the drive. He only rode the shovelhead when she was riding with him—he'd told her it felt empty when she wasn't on it. They'd ride it tonight. When she heard him open the side gate, she propped back up on her elbows and called out, "Hey you, I'm back here."

He came through the arbor and grinned when he saw her looking over her shoulder at him. When he got to the edge of her quilt, he dropped to his hands and toes to loom over her. "Hey, babe. You look like you're having a good day." He nipped at her shoulder, then kissed the same spot. He shifted and lay down next to her on the quilt.

"Mmmm. I am. It's nice out here. I'm relaxed. And I'm really looking forward to tonight." They were going with Tara and Jax to a concert in Sacramento. Afterward, they planned to stop at Slim's in Stockton for pool, good bar food, and blues. Away from the MC. Getting the guys to

agree had taken some effort, but she knew Opie was now looking forward to it, too—if only because *she* was excited and happy about it.

Unbeknownst to Opie and Jax, and in a girlfriends-y move uncharacteristic of either Tara or Lilli, the women had conferred on their wardrobe. They'd decided to really play up the “biker chick” angle, and Lilli was looking forward to tarting it up a little.

She felt Opie trailing his fingers along her arm, tracing the faint, thin scar from the last Lobo attack. He eased his hand over her shoulder, then ran the backs of his fingers over the contours of her back. She pulled herself out of her thoughts. She crossed her arms under her head and lay prone on the quilt, her head turned toward him. He was focused on his fingers, which were tracing the outlines of her tattoos. He scooted right up against her and leaned down to kiss her shoulder blade. She loved the feel of his clothed body pressed against her nearly-nude one, the denim and leather warm and rough on her skin. She felt his fingers slide under the silky material of her bikini bottom and caress the spot right at the top of her cleft, then lightly trace the edge of her suit to her hip, hooking his finger through the silver ring at the side. She squirmed and moaned quietly. She saw him lick his lips, and then he untied the string across her back.

She rolled onto her back, and her now-loose top shifted away from her breasts. She pulled it off, then stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, elongating her body and raising her breasts toward him subtly. He moaned low in his chest and rested his hand lightly over her heart. He whispered, “Seeing you like this, so close to me, the sun shining on your beautiful body . . . God, Lilli. You are so precious to me.” He snaked his hand around her neck and leaned over and onto her to kiss her.

The love they made that afternoon in the sun was slow, sweet, and quiet.

*

After the concert, Opie and Jax were riding side by side down I-5, their old ladies wrapped around them, headed toward Stockton. It was late enough that the freeway was relatively clear. They were doing about 90, the roar of the engines heavy in the air. Lilli was a little high, a little drunk, and feeling really good. It had been a great day. She wrapped herself tighter around Opie, then slowly, subtly slid one hand down to his crotch. She'd never done it before; it was pretty damn dangerous, considering that they were balanced on a 1000-pound machine Opie was operating with his hands. In fact, he flinched when she pressed her hand against him, and the shovelhead wobbled. He was half-hard already. She understood; riding with him always got her wet.

He turned his head a couple of degrees toward her. But he didn't move her hand. She squeezed and felt him fill out. She squeezed again, and moved her hand along his length. He jostled the throttle a little, and the engine revved. *Then* he caught her hand in his, brought it to his lips for a kiss, and placed it firmly on his abdomen with a pat. She looked over and, in the staccato glow of the roadway lights, saw Jax and Tara laughing at them. She grinned and shrugged.

When they got off their bikes at Slim's, Opie swung around and grabbed her face in his hands, kissing her hard, his tongue deep in her mouth, before they even had their helmets off. She grabbed his belt and pulled him against her.

Jax cleared his throat. "You want us to wait for you inside?"

Opie laughed against her mouth. "Nah, we're coming. Just had to bleed the line a little." He gave her ass a little squeeze.

Lilli took off her helmet and shook her hair out. She knew Opie liked that move especially, and, indeed, she had his full attention. As she took off her jacket and put it in his saddle bag, his eyes roved up and down her body, and he shook his head ruefully and sighed. "Yeah. Let's go be in public. That sounds *great*."

The "biker chick" look had gone over really well. Lilli was a little disconcerted by the strength of the reaction, actually, since it was not a look that would ever be routine for her. Still, it was fun to have Opie so befuddled. She was wearing tall, stiletto-heeled black boots over skinny jeans, and a fitted black halter top with a spray of black sequins and a deep neckline. The rise on her jeans was quite low, so when she raised her arms, a couple of inches of bare belly showed; she was hoping (against hope) to get Opie on the dance floor to make use of that feature. Though she didn't generally wear much jewelry at all, tonight she'd donned silver hoop earrings, a black leather choker, and a leather cuff on each wrist.

She had also put on pretty heavy makeup, lining her eyes with dark kohl drawn out at the outside corners. Her self-appraisal was that she'd achieved an exotic look with an edge, but had stopped just on the right side of the border between classy and cheap. Opie had been rendered slack-jawed stupid at first and then had nearly ruined her work by pushing her against the kitchen wall and kissing her with intent.

Tara was in skinny jeans and tall boots, too. She was wearing a snug white lace top with a wide boat neckline and long sleeves; just enough of her red satin bra and otherwise-bare torso showed through. Lots of jewelry and makeup. They looked good.

The guys looked like they always did: jeans and kutties, Opie in his boots, Jax in his bright white sneakers. No complaints—that was their preferred look for their men. And Opie had left his beanie at home and was wearing his hair in a ponytail—also Lilli's preferred look. Until later, anyway, when she'd want it loose.

Slim's was a huge place: part pool hall, part dance hall, part bar and grill. They intended to avail themselves of all the parts tonight. They ate good burgers and shared great fries. They drank beer—Lilli and Tara going a bit heavier than the guys, who didn't ride fucked up. They played some pool, and both women made the most of bending over the table in front of their men. They laughed and teased and joked. And no one mentioned SAMCRO. It was a great time. Lilli hadn't felt this loose in ages. She was kind of giddy. She liked it. She was happy. Really happy.

The blues band went live, and they settled at a table near the dance floor and ordered drinks. Tara and Lilli ordered tequila shots. They did the little ritual—*salt, tequila, lime*—and ordered another round. Lilli saw the guys exchange a glance. “What?” she demanded.

Opie gave her a measured look. “You know I love it when you’re buzzed, babe.” She raised her eyebrows and smirked at him, and he grinned back. “But if you’re too drunk to balance on the bike, we have a problem. So just slow down a little, okay?” She looked at Tara. They turned to the guys and, in unison, flipped them off. But when the next round of shots came, they let them sit.

Lilli and Tara danced in their seats for the first couple of numbers, then Lilli lay back into Opie’s lap and smiled up at him. “Dance with me.” She twisted her fingers into his beard.

He leaned down and kissed her. “You know I won’t, babe.” Opie didn’t dance. Not even in the living room.

She made a little pout and sat up. She saw Jax shaking his head at Tara; apparently a strikeout there, too. *Macho biker bullshit. Well, fine. Their loss.* She grinned at Tara and wiggled her eyebrows. “You wanna dance, Tara?” Tara smiled, winked, stood up, and held out her hand.

The women walked hand in hand to the dance floor.

Chapter 19

Opie and Jax watched their old ladies walk away together. Jax chuckled. “Damn, brother. Those two are a handful. Hard enough to manage one at a time. Doubly dangerous together.”

Opie nodded. “No doubt. But don’t let Lilli hear you say that; she’ll kick your ass.”

Jax laughed. “Seriously.” They knocked their beer bottles together and then were quiet as they watched their women move.

And move they did. They were truly dancing together, not just side by side. They were holding hands, moving together, moving apart, twirling and turning. Holding each other close. *Caressing* each other. *Jesus*. Opie swallowed. He studied Lilli’s body, the way her amazing, wonderful, perfect ass rolled and canted, the way her hips flexed. That’s how she moved when she was on him. He swallowed again and felt a clicking catch in his throat. Without taking his eyes off her, he took a pull of beer.

She looked toward the table, and they made eye contact. She sent him a saucy smile. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tara smiling at Jax. They were putting on a show for their men.

They moved together again, arms around each other, and he saw Tara’s hands on Lilli’s ass for a moment. Then Lilli lowered to the floor in a slow, sensuous squat down Tara’s body and swayed back up to standing. *Jesus fuck*. Tara danced around Lilli, trailing a hand around her torso. He was about to pass out. He doubted there was blood anywhere else in his body but his raging cock.

Jax whistled, long and low. “Fuck. Me.”

But Opie was intent on Lilli and didn’t respond. She raised her arms over her head gracefully, her hips swaying and rolling—and her flat, strong, lickable belly bared and glowing red in the dance floor lights. She turned in a slow, graceful circle, her arms still held high, and he saw the toned muscles of her back flexed, her tattoos rippling, and the few inches of skin exposed just above the low waistline of those smoking hot jeans. The light caught her just right, made shadows in the dimples above her ass. *Jesus fucking Christ*. He had to close his eyes. It was like staring at the damn sun.

“Ope.” Jax’s voice was surprisingly sharp, and Opie opened his eyes. Two yahoos were trying to get in with Lilli and Tara, dancing next to them and trying to separate them. He and Jax stood, on alert. They moved fast to the dance floor but didn’t intervene yet. They looked at each other briefly, understood, and then returned their attention to their women. Opie was having a hard time holding off, but he knew how Lilli would feel if he came to the rescue too quickly and started a scene. Tara was the same way, and he could feel Jax’s tension, too. With effort, they stood and watched while the women first tried to ignore, then to politely decline, then to firmly rebuff. These assholes were tenacious, and Opie was buzzing with the need to intervene. He was really wishing he and Jax hadn’t left their sidearms locked in their bikes.

Then one of the yahoos put his hand on Lilli's waist, under her shirt. She knocked it away angrily, and he grabbed her arm and yanked. The other grabbed Tara. It was on.

As one, Opie and Jax charged the dance floor.

Chapter 20

Putting hands on Lilli and Tara was a bad mistake. Lilli rolled her arm and spun, painfully twisting the arm of the guy who had her. Then she drove her fist into his throat. He went down sputtering and wheezing. Tara had kicked the guy who had her hard in the nuts with her platform boot; he was down, too. Barely anyone on the dance floor had even made way. Huh. Rough crowd.

It all had happened so fast that both guys were on the floor before Jax and Opie even got there. All that was left was cleanup. So Opie picked up Lilli's douchebag by the throat (he squawked), and Jax picked up Tara's likewise. They dragged them off the dance floor. Lilli and Tara followed.

Lilli was feeling pretty good. She hadn't gotten scared, only pissed, and she and Tara had dispatched the problem readily. Hear them roar! But the black rage she saw on Opie's face gave her pause. He was visibly vibrating. Jax didn't look any calmer. These douchebags they'd *already handled* were in for a world of hurt from their enraged, be-ringed old men—and they knew it. They looked terrified . . . and then she saw a group of similar douchebags who looked like they were just figuring out what had happened to their friends. She put her hand on Opie's back. "Opie. You're about to start a riot. Think."

She watched as reason fought with rage and won. "Get. The. Fuck. Out." Opie spat each word through clenched teeth, then put the douchebag down. Jax put his douchebag down, too, and they both made haste away. Lilli and Tara led their men back to the table and ordered a round of beer. Lilli picked up her tequila shooter and waved it questioningly at Tara. "Hell yes," said Tara. They tossed them back and sucked lime.

They stayed and finished the round they'd ordered, but Opie and Jax were distracted and angry. Opie kept looking around the bar and would *not* take his hand off Lilli. He rested it on her back, her knee. He held her hand. He draped his arm around her. He was on possessive-protective high alert. Jax was just as bad. Finally, Tara said, "Okay. Anyone else feel like our great date ended a while ago? Ready to head back?" All in agreement, they headed out. Opie led, his hand firmly around Lilli's. She sighed but let him do his macho thing.

Just before they got to their bikes, two trucks sped around them, kicking up gravel from the lot. The trucks skidded to a stop on either side of them, and six drunk, angry douchebags, including the night's guest stars, jumped out. Opie tried to pull Lilli, who was nearest one of the trucks, behind him, but she was yanked away. She heard him bellow her name as she spun to disengage herself and fight.

She felt a bright burst of pain in the side of her head. Then everything went black.

Chapter 21

“LILLI! LILLI!” *FUCK!* Before he could get between these fuckers and Lilli, the one she’d punched in the bar had grabbed her and yanked her hard away. At the same time, two different guys grabbed and held him. Then—*Jesus Jesus Lilli!*—the guy she’d hit in the bar slammed her in the side of the head with a **BIG FUCKING CHAIN**. She dropped like a stone. He took a hard hit to the gut from yet another motherfucker and doubled over. *He had to get to her.* He relaxed into their hold until he felt them ease up a little. He reared back up, using all the power he could muster to pull his arms forward, dragging both guys holding him. Driven by a rage and panic almost too big to feel, he fought, trying to work his way to Lilli.

He took one of his assailants down right away with two monstrous right crosses to his head, and then he stomped him in the head to keep him down. The guy who had Lilli had thrown her into the bed of the truck and *GOTTEN UP THERE WITH HER!* He was going to rip every one of these fuckers into little pieces and feed them to their mothers. The one who had Lilli was going to eat his own flayed cock first.

Behind the deafening white noise that had filled his brain, he could hear Jax. He didn’t know what had happened with Tara. He couldn’t worry about that. He couldn’t worry about Jax. He could only think of Lilli. He felt something hit the back of his head. His head jerked hard with the impact, but he barely felt it. He turned and grabbed the 2x4 in one hand, then shoved it hard longwise into the guy’s face. The guy dropped, and Opie drove the board straight down, into his gut. He turned back and stalked toward the truck where Lilli was. He was tackled around his legs, and he went down. He felt a hard kick to his back. He rolled over and grabbed the foot as it came back for a second impact. He held on and twisted until he heard it break. Then he threw it and the body it was attached to away and stood back up.

Just as he did, he saw Lilli on her feet in the bed of that truck. He could see her clearly in the harsh glare of the parking lot lights. The side of her head was plastered with blood, was running with it. Her top was torn, her breasts exposed. Her jeans were open. He bellowed wordlessly. He didn’t see the guy who’d hurt her. As he finally, finally reached the truck and jumped in, he saw that she was turning the fucker into soup. She was screaming hoarsely and stomping the high, slender heel of her boot into his crotch over and over. He was a bloody, shrieking mess. Opie didn’t think there was any cock left for him to flay.

He grabbed Lilli and held her, pressing her bare breasts to his chest. She fought him hard at first, landing a pretty solid upper cut to his jaw. When recognition dawned, she collapsed against him, sobbing, her hands clutching his kutte. He tried gently to take a look at her head, but she hissed and flinched away.

He heard sirens. He looked over her head at the scene. Jax was sitting on the ground against a tire of the other truck, holding a crying Tara. Both were bloody. Every one of the fuckers who’d attacked them was disabled or unconscious. And the whole tableau was ringed by a crowd, none of whom had gotten into the mix.

The crowd had been good for one thing: there were enough witnesses to attest to what had happened that they weren't even being brought in for questioning. The Stockton PD and the EMTs were being very solicitous of Lilli and Tara, and even of Opie and Jax. A guy in a kutte didn't usually get much love from law, but the stories of how they'd fought for their women seemed to have struck a nerve. Not to mention the stories of how Lilli had fought for herself.

None of the motherfuckers was dead . . . yet. The two in the worst shape just happened to be the two who'd started this bullshit in the first place. Lilli had come close to eviscerating the guy who'd hurt her. His package was nothing but ground meat, and she'd done some serious damage to his actual innards, too. Even with all that, there was no talk of the beating she gave being anything other than justified. And she had the battle wounds to prove it. A gash in the side of her head, a concussion, and lots of bruises—bruises in places that made Opie want to get himself to the hospital and finish gutting the fucker.

That was still on the agenda. If he survived Lilli's vengeance, he damn sure wouldn't survive Opie's. This was not over.

Jax had done the damage to Tara's assailant. She, too, had been knocked cold—hit in the forehead—and by the time she came to, Jax had pulled him off her. Opie didn't know what the fucker had done to Tara besides opening a gash on her forehead and knocking her out, and it wasn't his place to ask. But Jax had bashed his face in good. Most of the bones were shattered. They'd had to trach him at the scene. He was alive, but Opie figured that one way or another, he wouldn't be breathing much longer, through any orifice. Jax had work to do, too.

The other attackers had broken bones and concussions, mostly. They'd all been carted away to the hospital already. In a paddy wagon. They were due some payback, too.

Jax and Opie . . . well, they'd been in one or two bad fights before. Opie's head hurt like a sumbitch, but the blow he took didn't even break the skin. He had a goose egg. He actually thought his ponytail saved him from more hurt—the board hit him right on the band, and his gathered hair had formed some kind of padding. His back hurt—maybe a bruised rib. His knee was a little gimpy from getting tackled, but he could tell it was nothing more than a strain and wouldn't keep him off his bike. And his jaw was a little sore from Lilli's punch. Jax had a hell of a shiner, a split lip, and probably some bruised ribs. Their knuckles were swollen and bloody, Jax's especially. Nothing new there.

Opie and Lilli were sitting together on the back of an ambulance. Opie had gotten her jacket out of his saddlebag so that she could cover herself. She was holding a compress to the side of her head. Jax and Tara were sitting on the back of another. The EMTs were arguing hard for at least the women to be seen in the ER. Jax and Opie agreed—both needed stitches—but Lilli would not consent, and Tara wouldn't go without her.

Opie could see Lilli was about at her limit for being fussed over. She was pale and drawn and looked shockingly fragile to him. But she still hated people trying to make her do things she

didn't want to do, and he could see the fire rise up in her eyes. He was glad of it; she'd been withdrawn and too docile since the fight ended.

She jumped down from the ambulance and tossed the obligatory blanket off her shoulders. "Enough. I'm fi—"

She collapsed to the ground, seizing. Once again, Opie bellowed her name.

*

Lilli was in surgery to ease bleeding and swelling in her brain, and Opie was pacing the waiting room. Every once in a while he'd rake his hands through his hair and come up short, with a hiss, when he hit the lump on the back of his head. Jax and Tara were sitting together on a couch nearby. The gash on Tara's forehead had been stitched, and she was holding an ice pack on her elbow. Jax had one to his eye and another on his knuckles. There was a box of snap-activated ice packs on a nearby table. A nurse had brought them each one pack, taken a good, long look at them, and then gone back for the whole box.

Stockton PD had been to the hospital to ask more questions. They apologized and explained that they were trying to get as much done with them as possible right away so they wouldn't have to be bothered again later, but Opie just couldn't. He couldn't think. He couldn't talk. He couldn't not kick the shit out of anyone between him and Lilli. He'd literally roared in one cop's face. The guy had unsnapped his holster in response. Jax had pulled him back and taken the cops over to the far side of the room to talk with him and Tara. Then they'd left, expressing their good wishes for Lilli.

The rest of the Sons and Gemma arrived about 20 minutes later. As soon as Opie saw Tig, he pulled him aside. He had made some decisions. He wanted the fucker who'd done this to Lilli to die hard, but he didn't want any blowback on Lilli—which meant none on him, either. It galled him to farm this out, but Lilli was his only concern, so he needed Tig to do this. Tig, who owed him for Donna. He explained what he needed, and Tig readily agreed. Opie had no idea who the fucker was, but he knew he had to be in this hospital, and he knew Juice could figure it out.

Juice and Tig left the waiting room, and Jax and Opie made eye contact. They held the look for several seconds, and then Jax nodded once. Opie went back to pacing. Gemma came up to him, but he shrugged her off. He was glad his family—Lilli's family—was here, but he wanted nothing of comfort. He wanted his rage and his worry.

He raked his hands through his hair and came up short on the lump again. He grunted, and Tara stood up and brought an ice pack over to him. She snapped it and reached up to hold it to his head. He flinched away. He was much taller than she, so his head was out of her reach, but she just stood there, one hand on his arm, the other holding the pack as close to his head as she could get, waiting patiently. She just looked at him; she didn't say a word. Finally, he took the pack and pressed it gingerly against the lump. He let her lead him to sit down next to Jax. Then she kissed the top of his head. That was it. He dropped his face into his free hand and wept silently. Tara sat next to him and put her arms around him.

*

It was several hours before the surgeon finally came out to the waiting room and asked for “Mr. Accardo.” He sat down with Opie, surrounded by Sons, and explained that they were able to go in and stop the bleeding and draw off the blood that had pooled in her brain, and the swelling was sufficiently retarded that they didn’t think they’d have to remove any part of her skull. But she was in a coma and probably would be for a day or two, at least until the swelling had gone down. Until she was conscious they wouldn’t be able to be sure that there’d been no long-term damage. The laceration from the chain had taken 18 stitches to close; the surgical incision three.

“Okay, then. If you don’t have any more questions, I’ll leave you with your family. A nurse will let you know when she’s out of recovery.” He looked around the room filled with bikers. “Just close family tonight. It’s late, and she’ll be unconscious.” Opie nodded.

The surgeon left, and Tara sat down with Opie to explain in more detail what he had told them. She filled in the hard parts that doctors often leave out. It was important for Lilli to wake up quickly; the longer she was in a coma, the less likely she would recover 100%. Or at all.

Opie jumped out of his seat and stalked away. The thought that she could be dying right now, the thought that he wouldn’t see her beautiful eyes or her bright smile . . . He put his hands against the wall and dropped his head between his arms. He yelled and punched the wall, leaving a smear of blood behind.

The nurse came in with the information about Lilli’s bed in the ICU. Opie, Tara, and Jax went; everyone else waited.

Opie stopped in his tracks when he saw her. He moaned and doubled over, his hands on his knees. He was dizzy. He felt Jax’s hand on his back. He took several breaths and stood back up.

She was so pale, so small. Her huge life force just seemed . . . gone. Her head was wrapped in a turban of bandages, her hair pulled to one side. She was on a respirator. She had dark purple bruises under her eyes. There were tubes and wires and beeping machines everywhere. Only hours ago she’d been wrapped around him on their bike, feeling him up on the I-5 at 90 miles per hour. “Tara, what—Tara, please, what—” He didn’t even know what he was asking.

He felt Tara’s hand on his arm, and he let her lead him. She put him in a chair next to Lilli’s bed and took down the rail on the side of the bed so that he could get close. Then she squatted down next to him. “No one looks good after surgery. People look like crap even after minor surgery, which this wasn’t. She’s pale because everything slows down in the OR.

“The black eyes are mostly from her pallor and partially from the trauma. She got hit with a heavy chain and had bleeding in her brain. That’s trauma. Remember, at the scene her eyes had gone red and she’d blown a pupil. All of it is from the bleed and swelling.”

She didn't say anything for a bit, then took one of his hands in both of hers. "The thing that causes me the most concern is the respirator. It means she's not breathing on her own." Opie's stomach folded in on itself, and he moaned. "She was when we brought her in. I'm going to talk to the surgeon and get some more information about what happened in the OR." She kissed him on the cheek, kissed Lilli on the forehead, and headed out, pulling Jax out with her.

Alone with his love, Opie sat and stared at her chest, watching it rise and fall in time with one of the noises in the room. Her hand lay on the blanket; he picked it up and let a sob erupt from his chest. Her sweet hand was so cold, so fragile. It felt like it might crumble to dust in his rough paw. "God, Lilli, please babe, please God. Oh God, come back to me." He laid his head on the bed next to her shoulder and sobbed.

*

For 43 hours, except for a couple of quick trips to the bathroom, during which he left Tara at vigil, Opie did not leave Lilli's side. He wouldn't leave the room when she was examined, and he was too big to force out. He wouldn't eat. He only drank because Tara kept pushing water down his throat, threatening to have him IV'd. Every passing hour that Lilli didn't wake up increased his anxiety a hundredfold. He'd learned that she'd already died once, going into cardiac arrest on the operating table. She hadn't breathed on her own since. Fear was corroding him from the inside out.

The Sons had been going in rounds to be with him. He didn't want them there, but he knew that they loved Lilli, too, so he just ignored them. Tig came in early on the first morning. He stood at the foot of her bed and said simply, "It's done, brother." Opie looked at him and nodded, then turned back to Lilli. He felt no satisfaction. He'd wanted to put his hands in that fucker's insides and make him watch while he pulled his guts out inch by inch.

Tara sat with him most of all. She kept him from really just losing his mind. She knew when he needed her to talk, to explain what the doctors and nurses were doing when they came in to poke and prod at Lilli. She knew when he needed to talk. She let him express his self-blame and regret without trying to make it better, understanding that he *needed* to blame himself. And she knew when to be quiet and just sit with him.

She was there the late afternoon of the second day, when he thought he noticed a change in some of the sounds in the room—a steadier beep than he'd been hearing—and when he thought Lilli's color looked better. She checked the machine—the heart monitor—and told him that yes, her heartbeat was stronger and yes, she too thought her color was improving. Those were both good signs that Lilli might wake up soon. So he'd spent the next five hours staring at her face, willing her to open her luminous grey eyes and see him.

And then she did. She opened her eyes and at the same time tried to take a breath. But the respirator was in the way and she was choking and heaving and then her hands were up on it and she was yanking. He hit the red button on the wall over her bed and yelled for help. Three nurses and Tara and Jax came flying in.

She was disoriented and fighting, but they were able to get her calm enough to help them get the tube out of her throat. It came out bloody, but once she was breathing unassisted, she slowly relaxed and looked around. She saw Opie and smiled weakly. He grabbed her hand, and she squeezed back. He could feel the tears running freely down his face, and he didn't care. "Oh, babe. Thank God. I love you so much. Thank God." He leaned over and kissed her gently and rejoiced to feel her kiss him back.

She tried to talk, but she couldn't get any sound out. She grabbed at her throat and grimaced. Tara stepped up, "Lilli, honey, don't try to talk yet. The tube that was down your throat is going to make it sore and hard to talk for a while. Getting it out just now was a little harder than usual, and it looks like you're probably pretty raw. You can hurt yourself more if you try to talk. I'll get you a pad and pen until you feel better, okay?"

A generic resident on night rounds came in and did some kind of testing on her reflexes and looked into her eyes with a light obviously too bright for her. Opie could see that the asshole was causing her pain, and it was only Tara's hand on his arm that kept him from bodily removing him. The blood was receding from Lilli's eyes. The right one, which had blown, still looked pretty bad, but the left was almost back to normal.

The resident left, saying only that her doctor of record would be in early. Opie really wanted to punch him. But instead he went back to Lilli and held her hand. She faded into sleep, and he watched her breathe for the rest of the night.

When her actual neurosurgeon came in very early in the morning, he woke Lilli up to test her. God, Opie hated hospitals. He ran the same tests as generic resident guy plus several others, including some that asked Lilli to write down words and draw shapes in sequence.

He asked her to write down what had happened to her. She drew a question mark. He asked her to write down the last thing she remembered. She wrote "dancing," and smiled at Opie. He asked Opie to estimate how much time she was missing. Opie thought it was probably less than an hour. He asked her to write down a number between 1 and 10 to describe her pain. She wrote 8. He stopped asking questions then, and pressed the nurse call button. Lilli lay back against the pillows, obviously exhausted.

When he was done, he sat down on the corner of her bed. "Well, I want to schedule some scans over the next couple of days, and I want you to be able to talk before I make a final determination, but so far, you're passing these tests with flying colors. Based on what we know now, it looks like, apart from some trauma-induced memory loss—which is not at all unusual—your brain function is totally normal. Again, I want to see some scans and get you talking first, but this is just about best-case scenario, Lilli."

A nurse came in and injected something into her IV. The doctor left, and Opie hugged Lilli as tight as he felt he could without breaking her—which wasn't tight at all. He laid her back on her pillows, and she fell asleep almost instantly.

She woke a few hours later. Opie was sleeping with his head on her bed near her side, but he came alert as soon as she moved at all. He smiled. "Hey, babe." She ran her fingers through his hair.

Most of that day, Opie just held Lilli's hand and kept watch while she moved in and out of sleep. She would wake with a start every now and then but relax when she realized Opie was there with her, holding her. By the late afternoon, though, she was more awake and alert. She even ate a little of the broth and Jell-O the nurse brought her, though it clearly hurt her to swallow.

Afterwards, she picked up her pad and wrote "What happened to me?"

He didn't know what to say. She was so frail. He'd almost lost her. She remembered none of it. Right now, she didn't own that awful memory. Describing what had happened to her seemed like too much horror right now. But he couldn't lie to her. So he said, "I don't think I should tell you yet, babe. You need to focus on getting well."

Her jaw set, and her eyes lit up. She was pissed. She picked up the pad and underlined her question three times, pushing the pen right through the paper. He grinned because he was so happy to see her fiery. She raised her eyebrows at him, and he could read the look: *What the fuck's so funny, asshole?* He straightened his face. This really was serious, but *damn* he was glad to have her back. "Can I get Tara's medical opinion first?"

She threw the pad at him. He picked it up and handed it back to her. "You don't want to lose this. I'm sure you'll need to yell at me some more." She flipped him off, and he laughed. After a beat, she grinned back. His heart swelled.

Luckily, Tara walked in at just that moment. Opie looked at Lilli, eyebrows raised: *May I?* She waved dismissively: *Whatever.*

He turned to Tara. "Lilli doesn't remember anything about the other night after dancing. She wants me to tell her what happened. I told her maybe we should wait until she's stronger."

Tara looked at her friend. "It's bad, Lills. Are you sure?" Lilli looked somber, but nodded sternly. "Okay." To Opie, she said, "Tell her."

So he told her everything he knew. Tara filled in some details that he'd missed or hadn't known. When they were done, Lilli looked stricken. There were unshed tears in her eyes. She grabbed Tara's hand. Then she took up the pad and wrote. "I don't remember. I'm so sorry."

At first Opie didn't quite understand. Then Tara started to cry, and Lilli hugged her, and he thought he did.

Chapter 22

Apparently, when one spends two days in a trauma-induced coma, they don't just let one go home any time one wants. They made Lilli stay in the hospital for a week after she woke up, even though the swelling had gone down quickly and, within three days of coming out of the coma, all of her tests and scans were normal. She was at her wits' end by the time she was discharged.

She had no memory of the attack. Opie, Tara, and Jax had told her everything they knew, but it felt like it had happened to someone else. She was more upset by Tara's story than her own. And no one knew what had happened in the bed of the truck—how she'd overtaken the guy who was hurting her or, with any detail, what he'd done to her—besides almost killing her, that is. She'd been told what she'd done to him, but that, too, felt like someone else. She knew he was dead, as was Tara's attacker, and she knew why and how. Opie had told her when they were alone. She hadn't been able to speak yet, and, when he'd finished, she'd written "GOOD" on her pad.

Opie had not, as far as she knew, left the hospital during her entire stay. When they moved her out of ICU and into a regular room, they'd brought in a sleeper chair, having by then come to understand that there was no fucking way anyone was going to get him to recognize the concept of "visiting hours." He was in protective hyperdrive, and, really, she couldn't blame him. She lacked a memory of what had happened, but she could see every moment etched in his face. Her heart ached to see his pain. He blamed himself, she knew. She had almost died; he had almost lost her, and he had been right there. He needed to tend to her, and she loved him too much to resist his ministrations. Maybe it was the traumatic brain injury, but she liked his pampering attention. For now, anyway.

Jax and Tara visited for long stretches every day and brought personal items for them both. They also took to smuggling decent food in. The Sons came in twos and threes to pester her affectionately. They brought flowers every visit, and by the end of her stay her room was a riot of color and scent.

They finally released her the day after they took her stitches out. She was talking and walking and unbandaged. She had an angry, jagged, three-inch scar starting just in front of her right ear and extending back, over the top of the ear. That was from the chain. She had another, much smaller scar, just up and right of the base of her skull, from the incision they'd made to draw off the bleed in her brain. Each scar had a halo of bald skin (well, stubble) around it. She was trying to convince herself that these dark red seams in her head looked badass, but so far she just thought they looked scary and gross. Her hair completely covered the smaller and kindasorta covered the larger, so she'd deal.

She also had big bruises all over her arms and torso. She had bruises in the shape of actual fingers on both arms, her throat, and one deeply bruised breast, and another large, really deep, bruise low on her abdomen, just above her pubic bone, spreading down to her inner thigh. She was glad she couldn't remember how she'd gotten them, and she was glad to see them fading.

All things considered, though, she felt pretty good. She had some slight vertigo and some really terrible headaches. She had scary, violent, upsetting dreams, and she hadn't been able to make sense of them. Her thinking felt a little slower than she was used to. But she was heartily sick of being still, and even more sick of being fussed over and poked at. She wanted home, and she wanted it now. She wanted her life back. She wanted to marry Opie.

Chapter 23

For weeks after he got her home, Opie stayed with Lilli. When he absolutely had to leave, he called Tara over. He *could not stand* the idea that something could happen to her and she would be alone, especially while she was still weak. After about a month, she'd kicked up a stink and refused to tolerate having what she called a "minder," and he'd gone back to his normal routine, but even six weeks after she'd been hurt, when she seemed again strong and like his Lilli, he could not make himself relax. Ever.

She wasn't quite as she'd been before. The headaches were gone, but she had bad dreams every night and jerked herself awake. She brushed him off when he tried to comfort her, and she wouldn't talk about them, but he was worried. To his knowledge, she'd never had nightmares before. He wondered if there weren't some kind of remembering happening in those dreams. He didn't want her to have those memories back. She wouldn't bring the dreams up to her doctor—and she certainly wouldn't let him do it.

He was surprised and a little disconcerted that she still favored a ponytail, since the style fully exposed her scars. Although he'd always loved her hair caught back like that—the way her long rope of hair swung against her back, the image it evoked for him of wrapping it around his hand and pulling her against him—he was beginning to hate it. He didn't mind at all that she had scars—she could never be less than perfect to him—but when he looked at these, especially the one above her ear, all he saw was the chain, her vulnerability, and his failure to save her.

Someone had hit her with a FUCKING CHAIN and almost killed her. And he'd been right there. He hadn't been able to stop it. He didn't know how to file that fact away. He woke with it. He spent his day with it. He slept with it.

One morning, she dressed in yoga clothes, got her yoga bag out of the closet, and grabbed her keys. He was sitting at the island with a cup of coffee, and she came up to him and kissed him on the forehead, as if what was going on here was totally normal. "I'll see you later, okay?" She turned to the patio door.

He stood up and got between her and it. "Uh, Lilli, where you going, babe?"

"I'm taking in a yoga class this morning. Scoot."

He wasn't fooled by her perky attitude. She knew full well that he was not going to be okay with this. He leaned against the glass door. "Don't you think we should talk about this?"

Yep. She'd been ready for that. Didn't make her any less pissed, though, he could tell. "Um, no. I absolutely don't think we should talk about this. I think you should move your ass out of my way."

He crossed his arms and continued to block the door. Her eyes narrowed. "I can just go around the front, you know."

“And I’ll be at your car before you will. We need to talk.”

“Gah!” She hurled her keys at him; he caught them in one hand. She plopped on a stool at the island and glared at him. “I. Am. Going. To. Yoga. There. I’ve talked.”

He sat next to her and put his hand on her leg. She let it stay. “I know you’re pissed, and I know why. And you know why I’m worried. Can we just at least really talk this out?”

She sighed. “Opie. We were at my six-week checkup yesterday. You heard him say I was cleared for all normal activity now. I can drive. I can work out.” She raised her eyebrows at him. “I can fuck—which I also plan to do today, by the way. We can get married, which we were supposed to be doing *tomorrow*.” They had postponed the wedding until she was healed. “I can get back to my life. *Please* don’t get in my way. I’m going insane.”

“I want you to have all those things. I want you to get back to your amazing life. But I don’t think your doctor has your kind of working out in mind when he thinks of ‘normal’ activity. I don’t think krav maga is ‘normal activity.’”

“It’s *my* normal activity, though. Anyway, I’m not doing krav maga today. I’m going to yoga. Strength. Flexibility. *Balance*. All things I don’t have as much of since I got hurt.”

“Okay. That’s fair. When does krav maga come back into your schedule, though? I’m not thrilled at the idea of what’s-his-name kicking or throwing punches at your head, even if you’re just sparring.”

“Scott is his name. Scott. You met him, remember? He sure remembers you.” She was quiet for a minute, thinking. “I don’t feel ready for krav maga yet. I need to be sure I’m completely steady on my pegs first. I *will* get back into it, though. I want to go for my black belt. I feel the need to keep those skills up even more now. I believe it was probably that training that saved me from getting more badly hurt. Maybe if I’d been better trained, I’d have been able to react quickly enough not to get hurt at all.”

Opie squeezed her thigh. “God. I’m so sorry I let you get hurt. It kills me that I didn’t keep you safe.”

She put her hand on his. “Don’t, Opie.” She sighed. “How about this. How about I promise to let you know when I’m ready to pick it back up. I will not be asking you for permission, *obviously*. I will just give you a heads-up. Best deal you’re getting here. You should take it.”

“Okay. It’s a good deal. Thank you.” He handed over her keys. She kissed him firmly on the lips and headed out the door, smiling.

He closed his eyes and willed his anxiety to back off.

*

Late that evening, they were curled up on the couch watching television. Lilli's head was in Opie's lap, and he was combing his fingers through her hair. At some point, he absentmindedly traced a finger along the scar over her ear. She turned to look up at him. He realized what he'd done and jerked his hand away. She took his hand and put it back, using her hand to guide his along the dark pink trail of the scar. He felt tears pricking his eyes, and he looked up before they could fall on her.

She sat up and straddled him. Still struggling with tears, he turned his face away. She grabbed his beard and turned him back. "Opie. Opie, it's okay." She leaned forward and gently ran her tongue over his lips before she kissed him. He kissed her back, but he didn't deepen the kiss; in fact, he backed off slightly when she tried to. She spoke with her lips against his, kissing him lightly every word or two. "Opie, I'm okay. I'm here with you." She slid her tongue into his mouth to find his.

He made a sobbing groan and put his hands up to frame her face and hold her mouth to his. His tears had fallen down his cheeks and into his beard, but he let them go. He kissed her harder than he had in weeks, his tongue plunging into her mouth, rolling over her tongue. He felt her arms sliding around his neck. He dropped his hands and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tightly against his chest. She was moaning into his mouth.

Suddenly she sat back. She pulled her tank up and over her head, baring her breasts to him. She dropped it on the floor behind her. She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned in to kiss his wet cheeks, then sat back again. He studied her chest. She was fully healed and bruise-free, but he gently cupped the breast that had been so badly hurt and kissed the spots he remembered had borne the fingerprints of the man who'd hurt her. He had not touched her like this since the day of the attack, when they'd made love in the garden.

She arched her back and pressed herself more firmly into his hand. He could feel her core on his erection, hot and wet through his jeans and the pair of his cotton boxers she was wearing. He closed his eyes for a couple of beats, then leaned down and took her breast in his mouth. She moaned and flexed her hips against him. He thrust himself against her, shivering. She pulled at his shirt, and he helped her pull it off. Then she reached down to unfasten his fly.

He pulled back. She was looking at him with hooded eyes. "Lilli. We should take this slow."

She finished with his fly and slid her hands in to wrap around his cock. She gave him a squeeze, and he sucked in a breath. She pulled him out of his jeans and ran her hand down his length. He tipped his head back and pushed against her hand.

She let him go, stood up, and dropped her shorts. "No, love," she murmured. "I don't want to take anything slow. I've been weeks without you, and I need you to fuck me right now. Hard. I need you to make me scream." *Oh Jesus*. She straddled him again. He slid his fingers between her legs, but she flinched and grabbed him by the wrist, placing his hand on her hip instead. She took his cock in her hand and pressed him against her entrance. He couldn't help himself. She felt so damn good. She was so wet and so hot. He thrust up into her as she was sliding down on him. She closed her eyes as she landed on his hips, fully penetrated. *Jesus*. At first she was

totally still, eyes closed—long enough that he started to wonder if something was wrong. But then she started to move, moaning and bucking hard on him right away. *Jesus* it was intense. He'd missed her so much.

He thrust up into her, meeting the rhythm of her bucking hips. He took her breast in his hand and brought his mouth to it to suckle her nipple. Her head fell back and she moaned loudly, grabbing his head and holding it to her, grasping handfuls of his hair.

“Lilli, God. *God.*” He needed to move more. He grabbed her ass in his hands and stood up, turned, and, without losing their connection, laid her longwise on the couch, his knees between her legs. He pushed as far into her as he could, and she clutched at him, gasping. He grabbed her outside knee and pulled up on it; she responded and wrapped her legs around him. This is how he liked her best—wrapped around him, as close to him as he could get her. He was still wearing his jeans. He wanted to feel her against more of his skin, but he was not about to pull out of her now.

He was deep inside her, not moving. He kissed her softly, moving to trail kisses down her neck and across her collarbone. She was moaning and writhing under him. “God, Opie, please! Oh, please make me come!”

He watched her carefully, wanting to know exactly when things went south if they did go south. He didn't want to hurt her. But she wanted it hard. He pulled back and slammed into her. She cried out, “Ah, yes!” He did it again. And again. Their rhythm took over and she was bucking up, forcing him deeper with each of his thrusts.

Then he wasn't watching for trouble anymore; he was riding her crest of ecstasy to his own. He slid his hands under her to take hold of her ass as he pounded into her. She was crying out with every thrust. He was grunting like some kind of animal. Suddenly, he felt her nails dig deep into his back and she lifted her back and shoulders off the couch, screaming “Yes!” over and over. The feel of her spasming around him sent him over. He sat back on his heels, pulling her against his chest, and he came with one more deep thrust and a roar.

Panting and sweaty, they held each other for a long time. Then Opie pulled out and shifted his legs to lie back on the couch, stretching her out on top of him. She sighed and relaxed on him, her head tucked under his chin.

“Lilli. You okay, babe?”

She snuggled against his chest. “I am so unbelievably awesome I can't even say.”

He chuckled and wrapped his arms more tightly around her. After a while, he carried her to bed.

*

Sometime in the night, Lilli started up with a gasp, and Opie was instantly awake and alert with her. She was sitting upright, just realizing that she'd been dreaming. Opie sat up and put his hand on her back. She jumped. “Lilli.”

“I’m fine, Opie. I’m sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep.”

“No.” He’d let this go on long enough. Time wasn’t making it better.

She turned fully toward him. “What?”

“The bad dreams have been happening for weeks now. I want to talk about them.”

“Well, tough shit. I don’t, and they’re *my* dreams.” She looked down. “Besides, there’s nothing to talk about. I don’t remember.”

Opie brushed her hair back over her shoulder, looping the ends through his fingers. “I don’t believe you, babe.”

She turned toward him sharply, and, even in the faint light from the half moon and the streetlights coming in the windows, he could see her fiery anger. “Fuck you.” She lay back down, her back to him, as far to the edge of the bed as she could get.

Yeah, no. He wasn’t giving up. He got out of bed and walked to the side she was balanced on. He squatted down, face to face with her. “I’m not letting this go. Something’s wrong. I want to help you, Lilli.” He put his hand on her shoulder.

She shook it off, kicked the blankets aside, and jumped out of bed. She left the room, slamming the door behind her. He grabbed his jeans off the floor and followed.

She was in the garden. She’d left the patio door wide open, but he’d have known to look for her there regardless. It was her private place, even now. He was welcome there (usually), but he’d always be a guest beyond the archway.

Little solar lights traced the edges of the pathways through the garden, so he made his way easily. He found her sitting on the stone bench in the new nook they’d made in the spring, staring at the ground between her feet. He sat down next to her; she didn’t move. It was chilly, and she was wearing only a little tank and his boxers, with the waist rolled. He could see the goosebumps even in the pale light. He didn’t touch her, though—she’d already rabbited twice when he had.

“Lilli. Running away from me doesn’t exactly convince me there’s nothing wrong.”

She turned her head toward him. For a few seconds, she just looked at him stonily. Then she said, “Why can’t you just leave it alone?”

“Because it’s happening every single night, usually more than once a night. It’s not normal, babe, and I’m worried. Maybe if you talk about them they’ll stop.”

“Or maybe if I talk about them they’ll be more real!”

She stood up and took a couple of steps away. “Lilli . . .,” he began.

She huffed a frustrated sigh. “Okay. Okay, fine. You win.” She sat back down, but she didn’t say anything more.

Maybe if he started her off. “Are you remembering what happened?”

“No. At least—I don’t think so. I don’t know. They don’t feel like memories. They feel like nightmares. But they’re the same every time.”

“What are they, Lilli?” He tried to take her hand, but she stood up and took a couple of steps away again. Her refusal to let him touch her was worrisome.

She didn’t go far, just those couple of steps. She wrapped her arms around herself, whether for warmth or protection he didn’t know. She kept her back to him. “They’re . . . sensations. Images. Vivid, but disjointed. I really don’t know what they are. But they suck.”

He wanted her to describe them, he thought she needed to, but he was afraid to push too hard. He wanted to hold her, but she obviously didn’t want that. So he just waited.

It took awhile, but eventually she turned around to face him and started talking again. “I’m scared that maybe they *are* memories, even though they fade in the day, like dreams do. I’m okay until I sleep. But I don’t want them to be real.”

She squeezed her arms tighter around herself—it was all Opie could do not to go to her—and took a deep breath. “Mostly what I see is just . . . bright. Flashing lights, shadows. They scare me, but I wouldn’t be able to tell you why. The worst part is what I can feel.”

She stopped again, and this time she turned and took another step or two away. “I feel”—her voice cracked, and Opie’s stomach clenched—“hurt. Hands on me. In—in me.”

Opie stood up without thinking, and she flinched and turned around to face him. He wanted to hold her so badly. This thing would just not let her up.

This thing he’d let happen to her.

“God, I’m so sorry.” He took a step toward her; she retreated the same distance. “Lilli, babe, will you let me hold you?”

“Are they memories? Did that fucker put his hands inside me?”

He took a step; she didn’t back away. He took another. She stayed. He reached her. Before he tried to touch her, he said, “I don’t know, babe. Maybe.” He took a shaky breath, remembering her torn clothes and open jeans. Her bruises. He tried to steady his voice. “Probably, yeah.” His voice shook anyway.

She turned and puked into a rudbeckia bush.

He put his hands on her back, gathered up her hair. She flinched away yet again, but this time he stood his ground. He had her hair. He would've let go if she'd wanted to get away, but she didn't fight him. He held her while she wretched.

When she was finished, she wiped her mouth and stood up, breathing heavily. Her face was wet with tears. Enough already. Opie pulled her into his arms. At first, her whole body was rigid, but then she relaxed, and he felt her hands come around his waist. He wrapped her tighter and kissed her head. "Oh, babe. Oh, babe. I love you so much. I'm so sorry."

She let him hold her. She wasn't crying anymore. She was shivering, but otherwise she was just still, in his arms. After a little while, he pulled back a bit and tipped her face up so he could look into her eyes. "Will you come back inside with me? You're so cold." She nodded, and he put his arm around her shoulder and led her inside.

He walked her to the living room, grabbing up an afghan from one of the big chairs and wrapping it around her shoulders as he set her down on the couch. He sat next to her and pulled her close. She rested her head on his shoulder. He combed his fingers through her hair.

"Did he do anything else?" She whispered it.

"No. No, Lilli. *No*." Opie knew that was true, though the thought that it had *almost* happened, that it might have happened had Lilli herself not been so strong and capable, that he would probably not have been able to prevent it, still kept *him* up in the night.

"How do you know?"

He shifted on the couch so he could look at her directly. "When I got to the truck, you were awake and on your feet, stomping the shit out of him. You'd already done a lot of damage. Your—" he had to force the next words out—"your jeans were open, but they were on. There just wasn't time for him to do anything more. I'm sure of it." He could feel his throat tighten, tears welling up behind his eyes. "God, Lilli. I'm so sorry I couldn't keep him away from you. I got to you as fast as I could. I did. I did." His voice broke.

She grabbed his beard. "Opie, I know. It's not your fault. You know I don't blame you *at all*, right?"

He took her hand in his and kissed her palm. "I know. I don't know why you don't, but I know you don't. I just—" he stopped and shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Tell me, love."

Again, he shook his head. "I don't want to make this about me. I want to help you."

She gave him a small, lopsided smile. “Well, I don’t want to talk about me anymore. So you can help me by changing the subject.”

He laughed sadly, an exhale of breath. Then he met her eyes and held them. “The most important thing in the world to me is keeping my family safe. And Jesus Christ, I just can’t do it. I’ve never been able to do it.”

“You fought off, what, three guys to get to me? Is that right?” He hesitated, then nodded. “Jesus, Opie, that’s like a *superhero*. *Of course* you did everything you could—you did a lot more than almost anyone could do.” She nestled back against his bare chest. “The world is fucked up, Opie. You know that. Bad shit happens no matter what. As far as I know, the only way to find peace is just to let that be true and try to live around it. That’s what I made myself learn to do after I lost Dougie and Curt.”

He squeezed her close. He didn’t understand how she could be so strong, so *level*, despite everything she’d gone through in her life. After he lost Donna, he knew he’d hit the limit of the pain he could deal with. He’d needed to wall himself off. Loving Lilli was *not* in the plan. Loving her like this—a complete and consuming love beyond anything he’d ever known—was definitely not in the plan. It scared the crap out of him.

He didn’t know how to just accept that the world was shit and everything could be gone in an instant. He didn’t know how to let her go out in that world and never be sure he’d see her again, and just be *cool* with that. “I can’t lose you, Lilli. I just can’t.”

She sat up and faced him. With the fingers of one hand, she traced the tattoo that spanned the top of his chest: *The center cannot hold. Anarchy is the only hope*. “You had this inked into your body, Opie. Do you believe it?”

He took her hand in his. “I did when I got it. But Donna was alive then. I hadn’t done time. Nothing bad had really happened to me. Now I don’t know what I believe.”

“Well, a lot of bad has happened to me, and I believe it completely. And it’s more than just my life that makes me believe it. I’ve built a career studying the ways the world has always laughed at people trying to shape it to their liking.” Lilli sighed and squeezed his hand. “Okay, lecture time. Listen up; the professor has something to say.

“Here’s what I believe: the only thing we can do is our best, in our own lives, and the rest of the world has to sort itself out. Morality, law, all that societal bullshit is just people trying to make meaning out of meaninglessness. The world can’t be anything but chaos, no matter how people try to constrain it. No matter what we do to make sense and order, all things tend toward entropy.”

Opie looked down at their linked hands. Such a gloomy outlook seemed at odds with the lively woman he loved. “That’s pretty bleak, babe.”

She pulled on his beard so he’d meet her eyes again. “It’s not, though. I don’t think it’s bleak at all. To me, it’s freeing. If control is impossible, then there’s no need to fight for it. We have to be

true to our truth, we have to love who we love as fully as we can. Do our best. Let the rest sort itself out.

“Then we have to accept that none of it means *anything* to anyone but us. We have to accept that it *totally* can go to shit in a heartbeat, no matter how hard we try to be snug and safe. We have to accept that we can—we will—lose what we love, because otherwise we become obsessed with trying to protect it rather than actually loving it.”

Opie looked up at that; it sounded like it was meant for him. “Lilli—do I not make you feel loved?”

“No, Opie, that’s not what I mean. I know you love me like I love you. I feel that every day. I’ve told you that. But I don’t think you really let yourself *enjoy* loving me. You let worry crowd out happy too much. You spend too much of your time trying to keep me safe and berating yourself for not doing what you think is a good enough job. There’s too much guilt in your love.”

That hurt, but he knew it was true, so he didn’t say anything. She went on. “I had a ‘safe’ life before I met you. In that ‘safe’ life, I came home from fifth grade one day to find my mother in the bathtub, naked and dead. Blood fucking everywhere, her wrists wide open—longwise, to make sure she’d get it done. The really sick thing is that she knew I’d be the one who would find her. Her ten-year-old daughter. She knew. Her parting gift to me was to let me find her corpse and then be alone in the house with it, waiting for someone to help me.

“My grandma, who moved in after that to take care of me, and whom I loved like crazy, threw a blood clot and died. She was singing “Bella Ciao” in the kitchen, loud and off-key, and I was in the den wishing she’d shut up so I could hear *Daria*, and the next *second* she was dead—two days before my high school graduation.

“My dad had a massive coronary and never woke up. My beautiful baby boy”—her voice broke hard and she started to cry—“crushed his skull while he was playing, supervised, on a playground that had been certified by the state to be ‘safe.’ When that happened, I’d already spent six months watching my 32-year-old husband get ravaged from the inside out by his own mutant cells. He got to live long enough to bury his own child and then suffer for another year before he died. Curt was the only one I got to say goodbye to.

“That was my ‘safe’ life. Nothing you and the Sons have brought to my life compares in terms of profound suckage.”

Opie was stunned. It was far more than she’d ever said before about losing the people who were the roses, and the thorns, on her back. To survive all that and still be the spectacular woman she was? Jesus.

She’d been quiet for a little while, but her lecture wasn’t over. “By the way: unless you’re holding something back, what happened to Tara and me at Slim’s had absolutely nothing to do with the club. That could have happened to anyone, anywhere. Except there’s no way any two *unarmed* ‘regular’ guys could have taken down so many attackers. Who you and Jax are, what

you know, what you've experienced—that's why neither Tara nor I was raped—without you it would have happened. And we both know that it wouldn't have been just one guy or just one time."

Tears were running down her face now in streams. All Opie could do was hold her hands; the thought of what she was suggesting paralyzed him with rage and pain. "Maybe *all* those assholes would have lined up for their turn. Even if I was able to fend one guy off, without you, what I was able to do wouldn't have been enough. So you *did* save me. A lot. *Thank you.*" Opie felt the prick of tears again and swallowed down the lump in his throat. He'd never thought of it like that.

"You're the best person I know, Opie. You're an outlaw. You're a killer." He winced at that, and she framed his face with her hands. "And you have the best, biggest heart of anyone I've known. You *define* your tattoo for me.

"The love I feel for you is enormous. Loving you makes me happy. It makes me calm. If I died right this second, I would die happy, because I've known you, and I've known this great, amazing love. My life is complete right now. If *you* died right this second, I would grieve hard. My pain would be as big as my love. But I would still feel glad that I had the time with you I had. The love we've had is already protected by the past. Nothing can make it unhappen. No asshole in a pickup can make me forget how it feels to love you."

She took a couple of long, deep breaths and composed herself, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I would like for us to stop talking so much about guilt and fear and just be happy we have each other. Can you let yourself be happy we're together right now and leave tomorrow to figure its own damn self out?"

He threaded his fingers into her hair and cupped her face in his palms. "For you, I can try." He leaned in to kiss her, but she pushed him back.

"Um, hold up. I have puke breath."

He laughed, glad for the dial to turn down on their raw emotions. "I don't care."

He leaned in again, but she straight-armed him. "I do. Ick."

"Hey, we were having a moment. You blew it."

She smiled brightly. "Oh, well. Why don't you go to bed, and I'll be in in a second, and we can have another *moment.*" She stood up, dropped the afghan onto the couch, and headed for the bathroom. Opie, feeling much lighter than he had in weeks, went to the bedroom, took off his jeans, and got into bed. He sat up against the headboard and waited.

Lilli came in, brushed and a little preened, looking fresh. She leaned against the jamb and smiled at him, then walked to the side of the bed. She made a show of pulling her tank over her head, slowly, then wiggling out of her (well, his—she wore his underwear more than he did) boxers. She put a knee on the bed and crawled to him. She straddled him. He put his hands on her hips.

She leaned in and feathered tiny kisses all across the tattoo that had featured so prominently in her lecture. He moaned, and took her chin in hand to pull her up.

“Can I kiss you now?”

She smiled and pressed her lips to his.

He pushed his tongue against her lips and she opened her mouth to take it. She tasted cool and minty. Clutching her face in his hands, kissing her deeply, he rolled them so that he lay on her, her legs around his hips. His hard cock was pressed against her belly; she flexed her hips and pressed him even closer.

He moaned and trailed kisses along her jaw, down her throat, pausing to suck on her sweet collarbone. He pushed up on his hands and started to move down between her legs. She pulled on his hair to stop him. He looked up and was surprised to see a serious look on her face. “Babe?”

“Wait. Wait.” He waited, his curiosity becoming concern. She took a breath. “Your hand. Use your hand first.”

Christ. He understood right away what she was trying to do, but the thought that his touch might upset her . . .

“Lilli . . .”

“Please, Opie. I want to feel *your* hand in me. Yours. Please.”

What else could he do? He came back up, his face even with hers, and kissed her gently. “I love you, babe. You tell me if you need me to stop.” He leaned on one elbow and caressed her face with his free hand. He combed his fingers through her hair. He trailed his thumb down her neck, tracing it along her collarbone. He curved his hand around the ball of her shoulder, gliding down her arm and back up.

He pressed the flat of his palm over her shoulder, at the crook of her neck. Her pulse was rapid, her breathing shaky. He slid his hand slowly down to her breast, lightly squeezing, running his thumb over her nipple. She made a tiny, almost inaudible moan.

He was watching her carefully. Her eyes were closed; she was concentrating. He continued downward, sliding his hand over the ridges of her ribs and down. Her belly was twitching nervously. He lingered there, gently massaging, trying to calm her.

God, he hated this. He hated what had happened to her. He hated her anxiety now. Why did she have to remember this? Why did she have to remember anything at all? Maybe he shouldn't have pushed her to talk about her dreams. His erection was gone. He just wanted to hold her; he was really worried that she wasn't ready to be touched like this. She should have let him use his mouth now. He should have kept his mouth shut earlier.

He curled his hand over her hipbone and slid back to cup her ass. He moved down the back of her thigh, around her knee. He was running out of room to delay this. Still watching her face, he slid his hand up her thigh and, finally, over her soft mound. He gently pushed his fingers between her legs.

She was completely dry. And then he saw a tear leak out between her lashes and down her temple. He pulled his hand away as if she'd burned him.

"Jesus, Lilli. I can't. I can't." She started to really cry then, and he gathered her up in his arms. "I'm sorry, babe. God."

She choked off her tears quickly. "Opie, I need his hands not to be the last ones in me. I need to stop dreaming about it. I need it. I need you. Please."

He'd made her talk, and he'd opened the gate that was keeping the memories at bay when she was awake. He'd made it real. He'd made it worse. He had to try to fix it.

He wanted to find that fucker's grave and kill him all over again. He couldn't deny her, but God, what she was asking him to do. There was so much bad here. What if it didn't work? What if all he was doing was associating his own touch with the attack? Jesus. But he couldn't say no.

Maybe he'd gone about it the wrong way, though . . .

He wiped the tears from her cheeks and kissed her softly. He slid his hands into her hair. When she kissed him back, he pushed his tongue into her mouth. He just kissed her like that, deeply and softly, nibbling at her lips, tangling with her tongue, for a long time, until she was breathless, but not from nerves. Then he left her lips and trailed kisses along her jaw, nibbling around her ear, licking down her throat, suckling his favorite spot at the base of her throat. He took his time.

When he could feel her body begin to move under him in the way he knew meant her arousal, he slid a hand out of her hair and down her back, cupping her ass and pulling her leg around his hip. She wound her leg behind his back, and he slid his hand back up to her ass and pressed her to him. She moaned—a sexy, breathy sound, not anxious—and his cock swelled. He leaned down and took her breast in his mouth, suckling deeply, then teasing at her nipple gently with his teeth. She arched her back and clutched his head to her. When she began to writhe against him, he brought his hand around her hip and slid it between her legs. Now she was wet. His mouth still on her breast, he slid two fingers into her. She went rigid and pulled his hair, pulling him away.

He raised his head. He stilled his hand but didn't take it away. Her eyes were closed. "Open your eyes, babe. Don't think about the dream. See me." She opened her eyes, and stared into his. He leaned down and kissed her, moving his fingers at the same time. She gasped. He lifted his head slightly, so his lips were just grazing hers. "I love you, Lilli. I love you," he whispered. "Feel me. Just me." He rubbed his thumb over her clit as he deepened the kiss, sucking her tongue into his mouth. She flexed her hips, pressing herself against his hand. *Good.*

He kissed her harder and pumped his fingers into her. She whimpered—he wasn't sure if that was good or not. He slid his fingers out of her and caressed her folds gently, running his fingers up and down, over her mound and back, sliding two fingers, and then a third, into her. She gasped, and her hips came off the mattress. *Okay. There we go.*

He bent and sucked her breast into his mouth as he pumped his fingers into her, his thumb on her clit. She gasped and arched back, digging her fingernails into his shoulders. She came quietly. When she was finished, he pulled his fingers out of her gently, caressing her as she relaxed.

When he went to kiss her again, he saw new tears. *Fuck.* “Oh, babe,” was all he said.

She smiled. “No, it's good. These are relief. Thank you.” She sobbed once, then cupped his face in her hands. “Thank you, love.”

He smiled and fought back his own tears of relief. Then he kissed her.

They slept the rest of the night wound together, dreamless.

Chapter 24

Opie stood on the lakeshore, under a carved wooden arbor wound with lavender. The soft scent of it was everywhere. Lilli had told him that it symbolized devotion. The sun was low across the lake. Jax stood next to him.

They were dressed up—black jeans, white button-up shirts, their kutties clean. Opie had half of his hair back in a ponytail, the rest left long on his back. Standing with them was the director of the Unitarian church in Stockton. The Sons and their families, friends, and close associates were arrayed on the grass before them.

The wedding was finally happening, a month later than originally planned.

He heard the strumming of a guitar and looked up. Bobby was playing a song that Opie had asked him to learn for Lilli.

*Your eyes they tie
Me down so hard
I'll never learn to put up a guard.*

As Bobby started singing, Tara walked off the cabin porch, dressed simply but prettily in a purple-blue satin dress. Her hair was rolled into a sleek French twist. She carried a small bouquet of white flowers. She beamed at Opie. He grinned back. Once she took her place, facing Jax, she gave her old man a wink.

*So keep my love
My candle bright
Learn me hard, oh learn me right.*

*This ain't no sham
I am what I am*

*Though I may speak
Some tongue of old
Or even spit out some holy word*

Then Lilli came out of the cabin and stepped off the porch. Opie's heart seemed to race and stop all at once.

*I have no strength
From which to speak
When you sit me down and see I'm weak.*

She was wearing a cream-colored dress with a simple fitted satin top. It was sleeveless, with a “U”-shaped neckline. The skirt was several layers of tulle and flowed away from her hips gently, falling just below her knees. She looked like an old-fashioned ballerina. She wore cream-colored

satin ballet slippers with ribbons wrapped around her ankles to complete the effect. Her hair was down, her long, dark, loose waves cascading over her shoulders and down her back. She wore a thin wreath of lavender around her head and carried a bouquet of lavender in her hands.

*We will run and scream
You will dance with me
They'll fulfill our dreams and we'll be free*

*And we will be who we are
And they'll heal our scars
Sadness will be far away*

She looked more beautiful than he could stand. She was walking toward him, smiling at him, coming to him, because she was his. Now she would always be his.

*So as we walked
Through fields of green
Was the fairest sun I've ever seen*

*And I was broke
I was on my knees
But you said yes as I said please.*

When she'd covered about half the distance between the cabin and Opie, she paused, stretched her arms out wide, and twirled several times, her skirt floating up softly. She came to a stop and gave him a brilliantly bright, happy smile.

*This ain't no sham
I am what I am
I leave no time
For a cynic's mind*

*We will run and scream
You will dance with me
They'll fulfill our dreams and we'll be free*

He couldn't wait. He strode to her, took her beautiful face in his hands, and kissed her with all the love he bore her. She wrapped her arms around him, matching his passion with her own. He moved his hands to her waist and lifted her straight up, over his head. She laughed down at him, her clear grey eyes sparkling. He could hear everyone cheering and whooping around them. He brought her gently down until her feet touched the ground, then swooped her legs up and carried her the rest of the way down the aisle.

*And we will be who we are
And they'll heal our scars*

Sadness will be far away

*Do not let my fickle flesh go to waste
As it keeps my heart and soul in its place
And I will love with urgency
But not with haste.*

*

There was lots of good food at the reception, and the liquor flowed freely. There was a big tiered cake, frosted white with black piping. Juice and Chibs had taken care of the cake; Opie wasn't sure how *that* had happened. The topper was a reaper astride a chopper, corpse bride in his lap. He'd been pissed—they'd gone too far. Lilli, on the other hand, had thought it was fantastic; she had laughed and laughed and kissed them both. She still surprised him every day.

Though he *really* didn't dance—he really *never* danced—this night he was happy to dance the first dance with his wife. His *wife*. The Prospects had built a dance floor and, as the wedding became a reception and the rows of seats became clusters of tables, they'd assembled it next to the arbor on the lakeshore. When the band started playing, Opie stood with his arms wrapped around Lilli, alone on that floor, kissing her deeply and swaying gently.

After that dance, the floor filled up, and the Sons started cutting in on him, so he kissed her and went to sit and watch. She danced with Bobby, then Jax, then Chibs. The Sons just kept coming. She looked happy and sweet, laughing and chatting as she danced, and each man walked away looking dazed. His pop even went up and took his turn, holding her close and kissing her cheek tenderly when the song ended and Happy cut in.

Meanwhile, Opie was noticing that the dynamic among the Sons was even more tense than it had been. Clay was sitting off a bit from the group, apart even from Gemma, and he kept exchanging loaded, angry stares with Piney—and Jax and Piney seemed to be involved in an intense conversation. *What the hell was going on?*

Bobby leaned over to him and pointed to the dance floor, where a loaded Tig was being way too handsy with Lilli. She was taking it with firm good grace, but she was having some trouble maneuvering him off the dance floor without, well, clocking him a good one. Opie and Bobby went up together. Bobby grabbed Tig, and Opie led Lilli back to sway with him for another song.

Lilli laughed and draped her arms over his neck. “Wow. If I'd known it would get you up here again, I'd have had Tig grab my ass earlier!”

“You know I'm going to have to flatten him for that, right?”

“Eh. He's wasted, and I look damn hot right now. Today, I choose to think of it as a compliment. That's why *I* didn't flatten him myself.” This conversation was bringing up unpleasant memories they still didn't totally share, so he leaned down to capture her mouth in his.

He felt a hand on his back and turned to see Clay standing there. “Mind if I take a turn?”

Opie just looked at him for a couple of seconds, then looked at Lilli, who smiled and shrugged. “Of course,” she said. Opie stepped back and let Clay take her in his arms. He sat down and watched, feeling guarded. There was something important he didn’t know, and he needed to figure it out. Clay and Lilli talked their whole dance. They looked engrossed. When the song ended, Opie got up, took her back from Clay, and led her off the floor.

He sat down and pulled her onto his lap. “I think you've officially gone through all the Sons now, so I want you back. Can I ask what Clay was talking to you about?”

She ran her fingers through his ponytail. “It was a little weird, I guess. He asked a lot of questions about Tara. I didn’t know the answers to most of them. It feels like he thinks she has something or knows something that he wants. I don’t know, though. Just a sense I got.” She looked into his eyes. “He makes me uncomfortable anymore.”

Opie looked over at Clay. “Yeah. He knows his time at the gavel is just about up, and I think it’s making him desperate. That’s why we got into the cartel shit, and now there’s something else going on with him and my pop, and maybe Jax, too. I can’t get my hands around it.”

“Jax hasn't told you anything?”

“No. That makes me more worried than anything—Jax keeping secrets from me. He did it before. He knew about Donna right after it happened. If he’s hiding something, it’s bad.”

What was he doing talking about that crap on his wedding day? He shook his head and took a breath. “Fuck ‘em. I only want to think about us tonight.” He pulled her face to his and kissed her deeply. “Are you ready to go?”

“I am.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Except you’re not getting on my bike dressed like this.” He slid his hand under her dress, going high up her inner thigh.

She smiled and licked her lips, drawing her teeth slowly over her lower lip. “You want to help me change, then? Husband?” He took her into his arms, stood up, and carried her into the cabin. Lilli blew kisses to the hooting and cheering crowd behind them.

*

Tara and Jax had tied a big white bow with a red heart at the center onto the back of the shovelhead, so Opie and Lilli got a good number of honks and waves as they rode late that night to the hotel where they were spending their wedding night. In the morning, they were heading off for a honeymoon ride to the Grand Tetons.

They checked in and headed up to their room. Lilli shoved him against the wall of the elevator and pulled his shirt open, popping most of the buttons. He slid his hands up her arms as she leaned in and kissed first one nipple, nipping and swirling her tongue around it, and then the other. He grunted and struck his head against the wall. The elevator stopped just then, and an elderly couple stepped on. Lilli smiled sweetly at them and turned around, leaning back against Opie's now mostly bare, tattooed chest and obviously rigid cock.

She reached behind her, between them, and grabbed him through his jeans. Opie groaned, and the woman looked at him sternly. He shrugged. "We just got married." The woman huffed and turned away, but her husband gave him an exaggerated wink.

The elevator reached Opie and Lilli's floor, and they stepped off. As the doors glided shut, Lilli smiled and wiggled her fingers in a wave.

Opie grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder. She squealed. He put her back on her feet when they were in their room, and she shoved him against the wall again and unbuttoned the few remaining buttons of his shirt. He rested his hands on her shoulders, and she leaned into his chest and kissed, nipped, and licked his throat, his shoulders, his pecs. He closed his eyes and rested his head back against the wall, reveling in the feel of her hot, wet, soft mouth and tongue on his skin.

Then she wove her tongue in a trail down the center of his chest, over the reaper inked on his breastbone, and down, over his abdomen, and still down, through the faint line of hair trailing away into his jeans. She was almost out of the reach of his hands. He opened his eyes and looked down. She was kneeling in front of him. "Oh, Jesus Christ," he breathed.

She looked up at him and smiled wickedly. Without taking her eyes from his, she unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. She opened his fly wide and pulled him free. Still holding his gaze, she licked the tip of his cock like a lollipop. He broke eye contact then, because his eyes rolled back. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, feeling her hands and mouth on him as she sucked him deep down and slid him back out, over and over, her tongue moving all over him, her hands at his base and on his balls. She pulled him out of her mouth and grazed his tip ever-so-lightly with her teeth. His hips twitched hard, and his knees buckled.

He caught himself and locked his knees. As she sucked him down again, harder, he threaded his hands into her hair and held her close. She put her hands on his hips and sucked him even deeper. He was so far in her he could feel the muscles of her throat flexing and relaxing around him. He was shaking with tension, resisting the powerful urge to thrust against her. She slid him back out and circled her tongue around his tip before strongly sucking him all the way back down. "Ah! Lilli! You need to—I'm going to—" He'd never come in her mouth. He loved her mouth on him, but he preferred to hold off his finish until he was inside her.

Usually.

She put both hands around his shaft and slid him all the way out of her mouth, running her hands lightly up and down. He shivered. She looked up at him. "I want you to. I want to taste you. I

never have.” *God*. She sucked just the first couple of inches in and pulled him back out, still sucking. He clenched his fists in her hair. She did it again. And again. He felt like he was falling apart. The sound of his heavy breathing seemed to fill the room. Then, forcefully, she sucked him all the way down. He howled and couldn’t stop himself from pressing her head to him as he thrust forward and then held there, pulsing, while he came. The sensation of her swallowing around him extended his orgasm until he was an incoherent, moaning, twitching mess.

When it was over, she gently released him. He slid down the wall to collapse on the floor. She primly wiped her lips and turned to sit next to him, lifting his arm and draping it over her shoulder so she could snuggle against him. He turned his head and pressed a kiss to her temple. “I love you, wife.”

“Mmm. And I love you, husband.”

When Opie felt like his legs would hold him again, they got naked and crawled into bed.

Much later, Lilli fell asleep curled against his side, her head on his chest, her left hand on his stomach. His *wife*. Opie lay awake for a long time, one arm around her, his other hand holding hers, fingering the rings he’d given her, letting contentment and peace fill him up.

*

He woke with sun streaming in through the hotel window and Lilli sitting astride his hips, naked and smiling down at him. “Good morning! I ordered room service! And did you know the bathroom has a tub built for two? I have big plans for that thing before we go!”

He smiled and grabbed her hips. He held her to him as he sat up, then wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. He was hard, and she felt incredible on him, only a sheet between them. “Mmmm. I like waking up with my wife.”

He slid his hands down her back and over her ass, his fingers sliding between the cleft of her cheeks and stroking. She squirmed on his cock, and he groaned. “How much time before room service gets here?”

She looked at the clock on the nightstand. She sighed. “‘Bout ten minutes.”

“Shame.” He nuzzled her collarbone. “What I want to do to you will take *way* longer than that.”

She squirmed on him some more and whimpered. “We could make out a little, though.”

He rolled them so that she was on her back and he was propped above her. “We could do that.” He leaned down and kissed her.

When room service knocked several minutes later, they were flushed and panting and had to scramble for the hotel robes so they could let the guy in.

Breakfast was the *last* thing on his mind, but then he saw the spread: waffles and pancakes and eggs (both his favorite, up, and hers, poached), bacon and sausage, coffee and juice. Strawberries and orange wedges. Biscuits. “Did you order everything on the menu?”

“Um, sorta. Almost. I don’t know—it all sounded good!” He didn’t know that he’d ever seen her so unabashedly cheerful before. He loved it.

They sat naked in bed and ate, Lilli sitting between his legs, trying some of everything, feeding each other. Making out. As they were filling up and winding down, he said, “We’re going to have to get on the road pretty soon.”

She moved the trays to the end of the bed and straddled him again. She leaned over and sucked his earlobe, then trailed her tongue up the side of his neck, nibbling at his beard. He could feel her breasts rubbing against his chest. “True. Yes. But there’s that tub . . . and we should probably start our adventure with a good . . . scrubbing, don’t you think?”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her. “I know I’m feeling pretty dirty.”

She climbed off him and went to start the water for the tub. While it filled, they re-packed their packs. Lilli checked her messages. She had one from Tara. She put it on speaker: Tara reported that the guys had helped get the wedding presents to their house, and they were stacked in the living room, waiting for when they got home. Tara ended the message emphatically: “NOW TURN OFF YOUR PHONE, LILLS.”

He chuckled and said, “I agree. Let’s leave all that behind for a few days.” She considered for a second, and then powered off.

She put the phone in her pack and went into the bathroom. He heard the faucet stop and water splashing gently. “Hey you—the water’s fine,” she called out to him.

He went in. She was sitting in the middle of the tub, her arms wrapped around her legs. Her hair wound down her back in a wet rope; she had submerged when she got in. She was watching him. He stepped in behind her and sat down, stretching his legs out on either side of her. The tub really was deep and big. If he leaned against the back, he could stretch his legs out fully. He bent his legs and slid forward, pushing her with him, and put his head under. He came up and slid back, bringing Lilli with him.

He wrapped her hair around his hand, pulling her to lie against him. She rested her head on his chest. For a long time, they just lay together in the steamy water, their fingers weaving and unweaving. Then he took up a bar of soap from the ledge behind him and began lathering his hands. He smoothed soap over her shoulders and down her arms, over her belly and up to her breasts. He swirled his soapy hands over her breasts until her nipples were hard against his palms and she was writhing against him, moaning. He rinsed his hands in the tub and reached back for a washcloth. He soaked it and squeezed it over her body, washing the soap away. He gently rubbed her with the washcloth, lingering over her breasts. She arched her back and reached her arms up to link her hands behind his neck.

He dropped the washcloth in the water and wrapped his arms around her to lift her up and settle her onto his thighs. Her ass was right on his erection, and she wiggled her hips just enough to make him clench and groan. She put her feet on the floor of the tub, just outside his legs, and lifted up. She reached between her legs to hold him steady, and slid down on him. She made a sexy little moan and rolled her hips as she settled onto his thighs. His toes curled.

He was fully sheathed in her, and he flexed his hips back and forth to make her gasp. He pulled her back against him; she arched her back. She lifted her arms behind her to loop around his neck. He wrapped an arm around her, settling his hand on her breast. He slid his other hand between her legs and fingered her clit. Her muscles constricted around him so strongly that he had to hold his breath.

And then she was moving on him, rocking back and forth, using her strong legs for leverage. She caught a rhythm, and all he could do was try to keep up with her, try keep his hands on her and match the tempo of his fingers with the tempo of her body.

She was moaning, moving faster and faster. Water was sloshing over the sides of the tub. She had her fingers in his hair and was pulling. Her head was on his shoulder; he turned to press his lips to the scar on the side of her head. "God, babe, you feel so good." He worked her breast and her clit. He wasn't sure he was going to be able to wait for her. He tried to think about something else, something distracting, but the feel of her wet body moving all over him consumed his every thought.

And then she was coming, crying out, surging on him. She suddenly sat up and leaned forward. His hands fell to her hips and grabbed on. She screamed and bucked on him hard and fast. He came, groaning, pushing and pulling on her hips, finally sitting up to curl over her back. He bit down on her shoulder. *Holy shit.*

Spent, he fell back against the tub, bringing her with him. He wrapped his arms around her. They lay there together until the water got cool, then they got out, finished packing, and headed out on their honeymoon.

A/N: The wedding song is "Not with Haste," by Mumford & Sons.

Chapter 25

A/N: This chapter includes two scenes from the series. With some adaptation for Lilli's presence in the scenes, I've kept them as aired and transcribed the actual script. The scenes are from episode 4.12, "Burnt and Purged Away," written by Kurt Sutter and Dave Erickson. The scenes are folded into a single, longer scene in my story. I've marked the dialogue from the episode with boldface. I hope that sufficiently covers attribution without getting in the way of your reading.

They spent two glorious days and nights in a cabin at the Tetons, but the real attraction to the trip was the ride itself. They'd taken two days for the ride there and two days back. Sitting a motorcycle for six or eight hours a day has its challenges, but Lilli had loved every second. Only when he was actually inside her did she feel closer to Opie than when she rode behind him, her arms wrapped around him, his hips nested with hers, her chest pressed against his back. She loved the feel of his muscles moving as he maneuvered the bike. She loved the sensation of being sheltered by his broad back.

She spent the whole ride horny as hell. She wasn't the only one. In fact, Opie pulled off in isolated areas twice the first day and again on the second day, and they'd gone at it on the ground, just out of sight of the highway. The trip back was much the same.

Best. Honeymoon. Ever.

But it had to end. The summer was almost over, and Lilli had a new semester coming up. Opie was starting to stress about being out of touch with the club. Their life in Charming was waiting for them. On the ride back, they stopped at a truck stop just west of Reno, talking lightly over lunch about their plans when they got back.

"How would you feel about having Jax and Tara and the kids over tonight or tomorrow to open the presents with us?"

"Sounds great. Tomorrow, though. I just want to be quiet at home with you tonight."

She squeezed his hand. After a few bites of his steak sandwich, he said, "I'm going to have to have a talk with my pop soon. He's been by himself too much lately. It's making him weirder than usual."

"Do you think it's club stuff?"

"Yeah, it is. But whatever it is, I'm not in the loop. Which pisses me off." He huffed an irritated laugh. "We must be getting close to home. All this shit is coming back on us."

Lilli sighed and pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Guess it's time to turn this on, then."

She had several messages from both Jax and Tara. She put the phone to her ear and listened to the first one. She let Opie replay it, then he turned his own phone on and checked his messages.

By the time they'd heard them all, Lilli and Opie had settled their bill and were rushing to their bike.

Someone had tried to take Tara.

*

Tara's hand was in a huge cast. It had been badly, badly mangled. Lilli took one look and ran to hold her friend. Jax pulled Opie out of the room. Lilli sat with Tara for over an hour before Jax came back. He kissed his old lady on the forehead.

Lilli asked, "Where's Opie?"

Jax looked serious. "He went out on something with Bobby and Tig. I'm gonna have to go too, babe." Tara nodded. It was odd that Opie hadn't told Lilli himself, but her focus was on Tara, and it didn't really occur to her to worry that anything more might be wrong.

But something more was definitely wrong. Jax was leaving SAMCRO. He, Tara, and the boys were leaving Charming, and Opie was angry and desperately hurt. Over the next couple of days, he kept her at arms' length—or farther, even. He mainly stayed away from home. She went to bed alone for two nights. He came home late and came to bed the first night, but he didn't touch her. He was out early the next morning. He didn't come home the second night.

She tried to get him to talk about it that first night, but he rebuffed her, and she didn't push. She felt like she *should* push, but she remembered San Diego and did not. She told herself he'd talk when he was ready. She told herself he'd come home to her when he was ready.

Lilli spent the next couple of days at the hospital. When Tara was cleared to go home, Lilli left a message for Opie that she was going to spend the night with Tara to help with the boys. She hadn't actually seen him in almost a day. She knew he was okay, because she saw Jax at the hospital, and he'd seen Opie.

They weren't having what one might call a great second week of marriage.

When the afternoon of Tara's discharge day was stretching toward evening and she still hadn't been signed out, Lilli went to track down someone with paperwork. When she came back, Clay was leaving Tara's room. He nodded curtly at her and walked past. His face was scratched and bruised. She stood in the hallway and watched him go. What the hell had been going on while they were away?

Tara was tense and upset, trying to pack her stuff with one hand. Lilli helped her. "Is everything okay, Tara?"

"No. I need to get my family the fuck out of this town."

Lilli put her hand on Tara's good arm. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

Tara shook her head. "I'm sorry. Just please be careful. Don't trust Gemma or Clay. Ever. That's all I can say."

Lilli regarded her friend, then nodded. Jax came in just then and kissed Tara on the cheek. He gave Lilli a hug. "Hey, Lilli."

"Hey, Jax. Is Opie with you?"

"He still hasn't called you? Damn. He went up to the cabin to check on Piney. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Rough week."

"No shit."

Jax's phone rang, and he checked the screen. "Fuck. I'll be right back." He stepped into the hallway.

Lilli looked at Tara. "I'm not going to ask any more questions, but you have to know I'm starting to freak out here."

Tara nodded. "I know. I'm really sorry. But I don't think what's going on can hurt you. This is our stuff."

Jax came back in hard. "Lilli, you need to come with me. Now. Babe, Phil's gonna take you home." Without another word, and before the women could react, he grabbed Lilli's hand and pulled her out the door.

*

Piney was dead. And now Jax was taking her to the funeral home, where Opie was waiting for his father's body to be cremated, after hours. Alone. Lilli was frantic.

Opie hadn't called her. He was alone.

Jax pulled up, and Lilli was off his bike almost before he'd brought it to a full stop. She threw the helmet at him. "Where is he? Where do I go? Where is he?"

Jax took her by the shoulders. "Lilli! Take a breath. Follow me."

He led her through a back door, and Lilli saw Opie leaning against a counter, clutching his father's denim kutte in his arms. It was soaked in blood. A fire was raging in the furnace, and she could see the side of a large cardboard box. *God*. Unser was standing just inside the door; he stepped out when she and Jax came in. She had no idea what he was doing here.

Opie was staring at the floor. He turned and looked, expressionless, when they came in the room.

Lilli suddenly felt frozen, overwhelmed by sadness and empathy. Jax spoke first. **“My God. What happened?”**

Opie’s voice was flat. **“I found him at the cabin. Shotgun to the chest.”**

Lilli was thunderstruck. Not Piney! God, no!

She heard Jax: **“Jesus Christ.”** He pulled Opie into a hard hug. **“Oh, I’m so sorry.”**

Opie took the hug impassively. **“Yeah.”**

“You think it was the Mexicans?” They thought the cartel had been behind the attack on Tara.

Opie regarded Jax for a beat before responding. **“I’ll fill you in. I just wanted to say goodbye. I know that he’d want you here.”**

“Yeah, okay.” Jax stepped back.

Lilli walked to Opie then and put a hand on his face. He turned his eyes to meet hers. He still had no expression, but she could see the roiling fires of pain and rage in his eyes. She felt tears sliding down her face. “Oh, my love. My love.”

He started to shake. She tried to take him into her arms, but he resisted her. He pushed her back and walked around her to the furnace. He stared at the fire for a long moment, and then he threw Piney’s kutte into it.

Lilli looked back at Jax. He hesitated, then nodded and left the room. When they were alone, Lilli walked up behind Opie and wrapped her arms around him, laying her cheek against his back. He bent his head. “Oh, love. I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He turned around in her arms, and now his face was ravaged with grief. “Lilli . . .”

She pulled his head to her shoulder and wrapped her arms around him again. He was rigid in her embrace for a few seconds, and then she felt his arms around her waist, and he relaxed into her, sobbing. “Aw, Pop. Aw, Pop. Lilli, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do.” His legs folded, and they both sat hard on the ground, still tightly wound together.

Lilli said nothing. She held him. She stroked his hair. She kissed his head, his cheeks, his lips. Their tears mingled together in their kiss. He held her so tight her ribs hurt. She didn’t complain. She gave him what he needed.

They sat like that for a long time, on the concrete floor of the crematorium, the furnace blasting as it consumed his father. Opie’s sobs ebbed, and eventually he was completely still in her arms. Then, suddenly and without a word, he sat back, wiped his eyes, and pulled himself out of her embrace and to his feet.

“Opie?”

He ignored her and strode out of the room. She got up and followed close behind. He walked outside and went straight to his Dyna. She was right behind him, but he still hadn't paid her any mind.

Jax walked up to him. **“You want to tell me what happened to Piney?”**

Opie spun around, shoving Lilli out of the way. She landed so hard on the ground her teeth rattled, but he didn't notice. He had drawn on Jax. *What the hell?* She stayed down.

Opie kept his gun trained on Jax. **“You should know. You're Clay's boy.”**

Jax backed up. **“What are you talking about?”**

“Clay killed my old man!”

Lilli was shocked. So was Jax. **“No. No, Ope.”**

“Yes! He killed my wife, now my father.” Opie advanced, the gun aimed at his best friend's head. **“Did you know? DID YOU KNOW?”**

“NO, Ope! Of course not! Bro, if Clay did this, it is a club issue. Let's take it to the table. Let everyone know.”

Opie sneered. **“What table? You're out. Remember?”**

He shot out Jax's tire and leapt on his bike, speeding away. Unser was still in the lot. Jax ran to Unser's truck but couldn't get it started. He yelled for the keys to the hearse. Lilli was on her feet. “Jax? What—?”

As he jumped into the hearse, Jax yelled to Unser: “Get her home! Now!”

*

Lilli about went nuts at home waiting for Opie. She had no idea what was going on. She didn't know where Opie had sped off to, and she couldn't reach either him or Jax. It had been hours. She was afraid to leave; she wanted to be sure to be home for him.

As she paced through the house, she kept passing the big stack of wrapped gifts. The wedding seemed a thousand years ago.

They'd been married ten days.

Finally, finally, he called and asked her to pick him up at the Urgent Care Center. She didn't ask him anything; she just grabbed her keys and went. She got there as fast as she could. He was sitting on a bench near the parking lot; he stood when he saw her car. She jumped out and ran to him.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. At first he just stood there, his back steely and straight, but finally she felt him rest his chin on her head. He put his hand on her hip. Not an embrace, but she'd take any sign of connection at this point. "God, Opie, I was so scared. Are you okay?" She stepped back and looked him over. His right arm was bandaged. "What happened? Please tell me. I don't understand anything that's happening."

He just looked down at her. Then he took her hand in his. "Let's go home. I'll tell you what I know." She walked him to the car and drove him home. He was silent the whole way, staring straight ahead. She parked in the driveway, not wanting to deal with the garage. He led her into the house and they sat down next to each other on the couch.

What Opie knew was that Clay had killed Piney, because Piney was blackmailing him to force him out of business with the cartel. He didn't know what the leverage was. Opie had tried to kill Clay and had shot him several times, but Jax had interfered, shooting him in the wrist. He knew that Jax was covering it up, making it look like Clay had been attacked by black men. And he knew that he needed to be away from the club for awhile. Maybe for good.

Lilli listened quietly to what Opie had to tell her. He spoke without any affect or emotion. He didn't look at her even once. He just sat on the couch, his elbows on his thighs, looking at the floor between his feet. When he was done, he just stopped talking. Lilli sat next to him, trying to sort out everything he'd said. She couldn't.

She slid off the couch to the floor and knelt in front of him. His hands were slack; she took them in hers and kissed each one. "Opie. Love, look at me, please."

After awhile, he did. He was so far away, though. Even the rage and pain she'd seen at the crematorium was gone. His green eyes were just flat. It was the thing that scared her most of all. "Don't go away from me, Opie. You're not alone. Let me help you. Let me love you." He closed his eyes. She pushed in between his legs and held him close. She kissed his cheeks, his nose, his eyelids. He didn't respond. She kissed his mouth, tracing his lips with her tongue. He just sat there.

Finally, she felt his lips move against hers. He took a great hitching breath and his hands came up to cradle her face. He kissed her hesitantly at first, pulling back to peer at her. When she looked into his eyes, she could see him fighting the grief. She could see him losing.

She felt his hands curl into fists in her hair, and then his mouth was hard on hers, demanding. He came off the couch and pushed her back onto the floor. They got tangled up in the coffee table and he shoved it so hard it flipped over, dumping books across the floor. He hadn't been like this since San Diego, but she knew what he needed. He pawed at her clothes, shoving her top up,

pulling at fly of her jeans, trying to get to her skin. She tried to help, but he wouldn't give her enough room to maneuver.

He released her mouth and pressed his face in the crook of her shoulder. He bit her neck. He got his good hand under her bra and shoved it up. He shifted down to take her breast in his mouth, sucking hard. The pressure of her still-hooked bra across the top of her breast made her a lot more sensitive, and she sucked in a breath at the near-pain of his mouth and teeth on her.

He got her jeans undone and shoved them to her knees. She kicked one leg free while he ripped his own fly open. And then he was in her, and she cried out. He pounded into her in a frenzy, his face over hers, his eyes closed, raw pain etched across his brow. Watching him, she couldn't come. He was suffering. She could only open herself to him and let him take what he needed.

He came grunting through clenched teeth. Then he relaxed onto her, his face again pressed to her neck, gently now. She wrapped her arms around him and let him rest there. He was quiet and still for a long time. She turned her head to kiss his cheek. She pulled his hair back and ran her fingers through it. She stroked his back.

"I love you so much, Opie." He began to weep. She lay holding him. He was still inside her.

*

Opie fell asleep that night with his head on Lilli's lap, his bandaged arm across her. Propped up on pillows against the headboard, she combed her fingers through his hair and watched him for a long time. She could tell that he wasn't getting any respite even in sleep. His brow was furrowed. He looked so sad and lost. Since she'd found him burning his father's body, she could feel him shutting himself away from her. She didn't know what to do to keep him connected to what they had, how to help him use their love to find some sliver of peace.

He was nothing right now but rage and grief. It was more than losing his dad, though that itself was catastrophic. He was in real danger of losing the club, too, and every way he knew himself was somehow bound up with the fucking Sons. He'd been born into it. They were his family, his friends, his identity, his very life. Lilli knew that the crisis of losing the club might well be more than he could overcome.

He'd managed to make a space for Donna's murder within his loyalty and love for SAMCRO, to maintain a bond with the men who'd killed her. He'd told her that he'd understood, on some level, why it had happened, why they would have wanted to kill him. He laid the real blame for Donna on June Stahl, the Fed who'd framed him to make it look like he'd flipped on the club. And he'd delivered retaliation a long time ago.

But Piney? That was all Clay, his need for power and his greed. That was pure betrayal. The man he'd forgiven for killing his wife accidentally had turned around and killed his father in cold blood. And Jax had kept him from exacting vengeance. Lilli thought she understood why—he was protecting *Opie*, not Clay—and she thought somewhere Opie understood it, too. But that was reason, and Opie wasn't interested in reason right now.

The scariest thing for Lilli was Opie's distance from *her*. Despite everything they'd been through, his default in crisis was still to pull away, and even as he slept on her, holding her tight, she knew he was doing exactly that. So she lay there, the weight of his sadness heavy on her, and tried to work out why. She thought he'd hit his limit on grief and needed to protect himself. She also thought it might have to do with his consuming need to protect her.

She was terrified, but she didn't know what she should do.

She fell asleep gnawing on the problem. She woke a couple of hours later, still in the deep dark of the night, alone. Opie had left the room—at least. Her heart sped up a little, and she got out of bed.

The light over the kitchen sink was on, and an empty Jack Daniels bottle was on the island. It had been more than half full. She headed into the hallway, toward the living room, and stopped. Light was coming from under the door to the second bedroom. She felt a little panic.

Lilli had had her greatest difficulty adjusting to living with Opie because of that room. It was Dougie's room. And she'd left it pretty much as it had been. She'd filled the closet with boxes of Curt's stuff, but otherwise it was still Dougie's room, and she'd gone in there in the years since she'd lost them when she needed to feel close to her boys.

When Opie had learned about it, he'd been maybe a little surprised, but he hadn't pressured her at all about it. As long as they hadn't officially lived together, everything had been fine. But he moved all the way in after she'd been hurt, and then she'd started to feel a kind of tension between her "ghost family" and the new one she was making with Opie.

He hadn't said anything, but with him there, it being his home too, she had felt like she needed to deal with her past in a new way. So one day she'd stiffened her spine and taken down most of the photos of Curt in the house, packed them up, and replaced them with photos of Opie and her. It had been a hard day. Opie had taken her into his arms without a word when he'd seen what she'd done.

She intended to pack up Dougie's room, too, but she hadn't been able to make herself do it yet. So, for now, Curt's photos were boxed and stacked on Dougie's dresser, and she continued to keep that door closed.

As far as she knew, Opie never went in there. What was he doing in there *now*?

She opened the door. He was sitting in her rocking chair with a box of Curt's photos open on his lap. He was bare-chested, wearing only the bandage on his arm and a pair of black sweatpants. An empty glass was sitting on the dresser.

"Opie?"

He looked up at her. “How do you do this?” His voice was thick. He’d had a *lot* to drink. Opie drank just about daily, of course; it was part of the life, but he didn’t drink to get drunk, so this was new. She didn’t know what to expect.

She came into the room and sat on the rug at his feet. “Do what, love?”

“Just pack somebody you love away, like they don’t matter anymore. Do you even think about them? When I die, how long before I end up shoved in your closet?”

She wished he’d hit her instead. No way a fist could hurt as much as that did. She gasped and dropped her head, trying to push back the need to cry. There’d been real condemnation in his words, a sneer for which she’d been totally unprepared. Opie had *never* spoken to hurt her before. Not at Lumpy’s on Christmas, not in San Diego. He’d never been cruel before.

Her first thought was to run, to leave the room, maybe the house. It was a nearly overwhelming urge, in fact. He could not have picked a worse topic to get mean about. But suddenly she knew that they were on another precipice, here only days after their wedding. If she left, even just the room, even for just a little while, she was somehow sure he’d shut completely off from her. He was looking for a wedge to shove between them. If she walked away now, he would have found it.

He was in pain. He was drunk. And she still thought somewhere in this he meant to protect them both by pushing her away. Understanding all that didn’t make his words any less horrible, though. She was failing to control her tears. But she looked back up anyway, and she answered.

“You’re sitting in my baby’s room. He died five years ago, and his crib is ready right now to hold his sleepy little self. I still wash his sheets and make his bed. If you open that drawer there, you could pull out his favorite Thomas the Tank Engine footy pajamas. I *haven’t* packed him away.”

By the time she described his pajamas, the image of Dougie’s little bottom covered in fuzzy trains vivid in her head, she was crying hard. Opie just looked at her, his jaw clenched. *Oh God*. “When you moved in, I tried. And I’ll try again. *For you*. So that *you* don’t have to live with my ghosts. I was happy with them, until I fell in love with you. Those pictures you’re holding? I took them down because I didn’t think it was right or fair for you to have to live surrounded by my memories of the only other man I’ve loved.

“And it was *hard*, you asshole. It tore me up. I did it for you, and I did it for me, because I love you, and I want this to be our home now. And someday I’ll find the strength to come in here and pack up my beautiful baby boy’s clothes and toys, and the blanket I wrapped him in when I rocked him to sleep in *that fucking chair*, all of the things that help me remember him, so that this house really can be *our* home. So it can be the place where we make *our* memories.

She paused to catch her breath and try to get control. He was looking down at the floor. She supposed that was better than just staring at her. She supposed it was something.

“I know you’re hurting, Opie. I’m so, so sorry about your dad. I know how you love him. I know that all this shit with the club is breaking your heart. And I know what you’re doing. You’re afraid. You’re afraid *for* me, and you’re afraid *of* us. I know that you think I’d be better off without you, and you think *you’d* be better off if you had no one you might ever have to grieve for again.

“*But I am not leaving.* I didn’t leave in San Diego, and I’m not leaving now. *I am your wife.* You can’t push me away. I can’t keep you here if you want to be selfish and stupid and weak and give up. But I won’t make it easy. What we have, this love between us, it’s so huge and good that it made me willing to pack up Curt and Dougie. I am giving them up for you. You can’t cheapen that by being an unbelievable dick and hoping I’ll run away from you. You can hurt me—and now you really *have* hurt me—but you can’t make me run.”

She put her head in her hands and really cried, huge wracking sobs. Jesus Christ, he’d struck exactly her weakest point. He’d stirred everything up, and it felt like she was losing her family all over again. Damn good thing Opie didn’t make meanness a habit. His talent for it was formidable.

She sat there, feeling entirely alone with him less than a foot away, and cried. She was not leaving. She was not. Eventually, her tears abated, and she just sat there, looking down into her lap. After a long time, she sensed him setting aside the box of photos. She didn’t look up. He stood, walked unsteadily around her, and left the room without a word. *Oh, God!*

Lilli collapsed into tears again. She reached up and pulled Dougie’s blanket off the rocking chair, buried her face in soft flannel that had lost the smell of her baby years ago, and cried until she passed out.

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It was daylight when she woke. She was curled on her side, clutching Dougie’s blanket. She was stiff from sleeping on the floor, but the real pain was in her heart, and it was on her right away. She sat up.

Opie was sitting on the floor next to her, leaning on the dresser, watching her. He looked like hell.

He took a corner of Dougie’s blanket in his fingers and pulled a little. Lilli felt irrationally protective of it and snatched it back from him. She looked at him guardedly. This morning, her resolve to withstand whatever he needed to deal out was much weaker than it had been last night. She was really hurt and still reeling. She didn’t think she could take any more mean.

Finally, he spoke. “I didn’t mean it, Lilli. I was drunk. I think I still am, a little. My head is just so loud right now. I don’t know. I can’t even understand what’s going on. My dad? How do I understand that? I feel lost, babe. But I hate that I took it out on you. I love you. I need you.

“I need to try to think through everything. I need to try to understand. I think I’ll really go crazy if I can’t understand. Will you help me? Will you come out to the living room and sit and talk with me?”

It was a yes or no question. Lilli had two choices. She thought they led down very different paths. With her throat sore and her eyes itching from last night’s painful tears, “no” didn’t seem like such a bad answer. She felt too tired to be his help. She felt like she needed some help herself.

But she loved him. He needed her, and she loved him. So she said, “Okay.”

Chapter 26

An hour earlier, Opie had woken in the Eames chair in the living room, bleary and disoriented, his head pounding. It had taken a minute or two, but then his reality had descended on him with speed and weight, and he'd sat there, stunned. Jax was leaving. His dad was dead. Clay was not. His whole life seemed ready to spin off into thousands of jagged pieces. Lilli was the only thing keeping him together.

And then the foggy, whiskey-soaked memory of last night in Dougie's room had arisen. Jesus God, what had he done?

He'd gotten up and stood next to the chair, getting his bearings, making sure his legs would hold him. Then he'd gone looking for his wife.

He'd found her sleeping on the floor of Dougie's room, curled into a ball where he'd left her, a blue blanket with cars and trains and planes printed on it clutched in her arms. He'd sat down on the floor next to her, watching her sleep. He'd sat there for almost an hour before she woke.

While she slept, he reflected on what had happened. His memory was shaky, and a lot of it was vague, as if he were remembering someone else's time.

He remembered sitting in the kitchen with the bottle of Jack. He remembered rage. He remembered going into Dougie's room, but he couldn't remember why. He remembered sitting there, furious and scared.

He remembered Lilli coming in. He remembered—this very clearly—knowing suddenly, without doubt, that he would lose her, too. He remembered, also clearly, what he'd said to her. And he remembered walking out on her as she sat on the floor, crying. What a fucking asshole.

There was a good reason he didn't like to get drunk.

While he'd been trying to piece together what had happened, she'd sat up, still clutching the blanket like a talisman. He wasn't sure why, it was an impulse, but he'd reached out to touch it, taking the satin-trimmed edge between his fingers. She'd yanked it back from him. He'd hated the look on her face. Fear. She was afraid of him.

He deserved that. He'd been awful to her. But, God, he hated it.

When he'd asked her to come talk with him, she'd taken a long time to answer, and in that empty space he felt the pieces of his life pulling apart. But then she'd said she would.

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He stood and reached out his hand. She stood without taking it. She folded the little blanket and laid it in the crib. She walked out and across to the living room. Opie followed, closing Dougie's door behind him.

She sat in one of the chairs instead of the couch, so he couldn't sit next to her. She sat there, her legs folded under her, her head down. He stood next to the chair, not sure what to do. Finally, he sat on the floor in front of her. He put his hands on her knees, inches from her hands, which were lying slack in her lap. "Lilli. Please talk to me."

She took a deep breath and looked up. "I need a minute, Opie. I have to get my own head straight before I can help you with yours."

"I really hurt you, didn't I?"

She looked him in the eye and nodded. "Yeah. You really did."

He could not have hated himself more than he did right then. "Oh, babe. I'm so sorry. I don't know why I was like that. I don't know where it came from."

"You want to push me away."

"No! I don't! I need you, Lilli. I *can't* lose you."

She sighed and took his hands in hers. With that small, comforting gesture, he relaxed a little. Looking down at their joined hands, she said, "Look, Opie. I know how bad you feel right now. I know how awful it is to lose someone you love—and to maddening circumstances. I understand that you're not thinking straight, and that you're sad and angry. And I feel terrible for having to say this right now, because I know your head is full and loud enough already. I try to be strong for you and give you what you need when your life gets to be too much. But I don't think I'm strong enough to withstand another night like last night."

"You take a lot out on me, and I let you. I love you, and I understand how dark and fucked up your life gets, so I let you. Even when it takes a lot out of me, I let you. Hell, I *invite* you. But I'm tired. Last night was too much."

Opie felt the jagged pieces breaking free, and the noise in his head was becoming unbearable, but he kept his voice level. "What are you saying, Lilli?"

"I'm saying we have to get off this freakshow carousel, going round and round past the same problems. We have to promise to fucking talk to each other, and not just when things get bad between us. We need to trust each other enough to ask for help when we're hurting. We have to promise not to bury our shit somewhere it can rise up and kick our asses."

She took a breath and looked him in the eye again. "We used to say we were talking about the important stuff. Well, we weren't. We connected so fast and fell so hard for each other that it's like we somehow decided that there wasn't anything important to talk about. We have to fix that."

For a brief moment, he was almost happy, despite everything, when he understood that he hadn't chased her away. He knew he didn't deserve her patience, but he was damn glad to have it. He

dropped his head for a minute to collect himself. When he looked back up, he said, “You’re right, babe. And I promise. I’ll need some help to break the habit—and I think you will, too—but I promise. I’d like to start now.”

He came up on his knees and leaned in, taking her face in his hands. “I love you.” She gave him a small smile, and he pressed his lips to hers. Then he stood and held out his hand. She took it, and he led her to sit on the couch with him.

Opie talked. He talked about Piney’s life and what it was like to have been raised by him. He talked about his mom leaving. He talked about his history with SAMCRO in detail and depth he’d never before shared. He talked about how he’d idolized the club when he was a kid, and how he’d loved and looked up to Clay. He talked about his friendship with Jax, growing up together in the club, being friends from early childhood, and really bonding for life when they restored Jax’s dad’s bike together. He talked about getting patched in together. He talked until he was hoarse and his jaw was sore, and Lilli listened.

Only then did he talk about what happened to his dad.

“I went up to the cabin yesterday to check on him, because no one had heard from him since the wedding. I just figured I’d find him way out on a tequila bender, and that’s what I still thought at first when I saw him on the floor. The first thing I thought when I saw him was how disgusted I was that he let himself get so sloppy drunk and how pissed I was to have to clean him up. But then I noticed the blood. And the smell! Lilli, he must have been lying there for days. Clay killed him and then left him to rot on the floor of the fucking cabin.

“Unser was right behind me—I almost killed him, coming up on me like that. He’s the one who told me it was Clay. He’d known for days. He left Pop rotting up there, too. And Gemma, too! She’s been like my mom since Mary left. I loved her like a mother. Jesus, Lilli. All these people who are supposed to be family. My dad’s family, my family. They just left him there with his chest blown out and flies feeding on him, and let me think he was okay. They lie and lie and lie. Right to my face.

“Even Jax. Fuck! For months he’s been letting me think that we would push Clay out soon, so he could take the gavel and I’d be his VP. So we could turn the club around, get it back to what it used to be—what it’s supposed to be. Like J.T. and Piney wanted when they founded it.

“It was a lie the very first time he said it—even then he knew he getting out. We’re supposed to have each other’s back. Best friends *and* brothers. And he played me for a fucking fool.”

He’d been holding his emotions in check all this time, but he couldn’t anymore. His voice wavered, then broke. Tears quickly followed. Lilli took his hand. “I can’t get my head around it. What the hell is going on in the club that would make any of them *act* like this? Who are these people? What secret is more important than a brother? How can this be my club?”

“It’s *not* my club. I don’t recognize it. Brothers killing each other? Lying to each other? Scheming against each other? Innocents getting hurt? First Donna, and then Happy’s family, then Tara getting grabbed, and now Clay beating the everlovin’ *shit* out of Gemma?”

Lilli jerked at that—he didn’t realize that she hadn’t known.

“Unser said it was because she found out about my dad and confronted Clay about it. But she lied when I asked her what happened. She didn’t know I’d found his body, so she lied to fucking protect Clay, the man who’d murdered my dad and smashed her face.”

He stopped talking for several long moments as he tried to rein in his careening emotions. Lilli, patient as ever, let the silence be. She just held on to his hand and waited until he was ready to go on. He squeezed her hand and imagined he could actually feel her transferring some of her strength to him through her touch.

“God, Lilli. I’m seeing now that the lies and schemes and greed have been going on for years. When Stahl brought me in, I went to the club right away and explained what had happened, that I wasn’t a fucking rat. Clay looked me in the face and told me we were good. Then he sent Tig out to kill me and got Donna instead. Donna, who had almost nothing to do with any part of club life and just wanted a fucking normal life for our kids.

“When she was killed, Jax knew right away that it was Clay and Tig. Hell, my *dad* knew practically right away. And all four of them kept the secret from me. They let me sit at the table. They let me grieve in front of them and take comfort from them. Christ, they let me *kill a man* they’d told me had killed Donna. They all knew. They all decided I was better off not knowing.

“Maybe they were right. I sure as hell wish I didn’t know how my dad died. And now Clay is still alive, and Jax wants him to stay that way—for reasons he says he can’t fucking tell me. He wants me to trust him, he says. Because he thinks I’m an idiot, I guess. But I guess I’ve been an idiot for years, thinking the club had my back.”

Again he had to stop, and when he spoke again, he could only whisper, looking down at his lap. “Lilli, I don’t know how to be anything but a Son. The club is all I know. It’s all I ever wanted to know. I don’t even know if I could stand upright without a kutte on my back. But how can I go back to it after all this?”

She grabbed his beard and pulled his head up so he would meet her eyes. “Opie, you are strong and brave. You are good-hearted and true. I know you can find the right answer. I am here to give you whatever help you want from me. If you want to leave the club, I know you can find a path to a good life without it. We’d do it together. We can go anywhere we want for a fresh start.”

“But, Lilli, your job, this house, your garden, your life here—I don’t want you to give all that up for me.”

“I love my job. I love this house. I love my garden. It’s true. It would be painful to leave, I won’t deny that. But there are other jobs. I have the luxury of taking my time to find the right one. There are other houses. I can plant a garden anywhere. Those things can be replaced. You can’t.”

He put his hands around her face and just looked at her. God, was there any end to what she was willing to do for him? With her love to lean on, he felt like he really could do anything.

Maybe even stay with the Sons.

“Do you think there’s a way I can stay here?”

He was still cradling her face; she put her hands over his. She was quiet at first, searching his eyes. Then she said, “Only you can know that, love. I think if you decide to stay, you are strong enough to use what you know now to make the club better. Your blinders are off now, and you’ll see what’s happening more clearly. You see keenly, Opie, when your view isn’t being obscured. Now that you understand what’s really going on, I know you can make it better if you want.

“You have to decide what you want. Whatever it is, I’ll be at your side.”

He leaned in and kissed her deeply. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. He laid his head on her shoulder and relaxed into her embrace. He whispered, “Thank you, Lilli. For loving me. Dealing with my shit. Helping me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She kissed his cheek. “You’re my love.”

After several quiet minutes, he sat back. “Can I ask you to tell me about Curt and Dougie? You’ve never really told me much about them at all. I mean, I only know Curt’s last name was Callahan because it’s on the title for the shovelhead.

“If it’s all too raw after what I did last night, I understand. But I’d like to know more.”

She looked uncomfortable and reluctant at first, but he didn’t retract the request. They’d made a promise. He waited for her answer.

And she started to talk. “Dougie’s last name was Callahan, too. Douglas Dominic Callahan. We decided when I was pregnant that we’d give all our boys his last name and all our girls my last name. We thought we’d have a huge brood—at least four. I was an only kid, and I grew up lonely, so I wanted a houseful.” She huffed a sad laugh. “The world laughs at people making their puny plans.”

Just like that, Opie realized how little they’d shared of their history. He felt like he knew her so well—he *did* know her so well—and yet he knew almost nothing of her life before him, as if she’d sprung new and fully formed into the world just to be his love.

She, too, talked for a long time. She shared memories about her life with them and gave him a new insight into her deep devotion to the family she’d lost. She talked about her love for Curt

and the heartache of watching him die slowly and painfully. She cried, especially reminiscing about her brief, brief time as Dougie's mom.

And then she talked about losing them.

"The daycare called me and told me Dougie had fallen and been taken to the hospital. He was already dead when I got there, and they didn't want to let me in to see him. I kicked up a huge stink, though, and they let me in. The whole side of his head was caved in. He'd climbed up a harmless plastic playground thing, less than 6 feet tall. He fell off the top and landed 'just right'—that's how they said it, 'just right'—on a metal toy truck on the ground."

Opie grabbed her hand and held it. "Did you make the daycare pay?"

Lilli shook her head. "Why? Nothing would bring him back. The mistake the aide made is one that every person who cares for a child has made countless times. I probably made it daily. She was looking in another direction for a few seconds. A few seconds. That's all it takes for your life to turn to shit. No point in taking her down with me. Anyway, it was really my fault."

He was confused and looked at her with a furrowed brow, but he held his tongue.

"Here's the thing. Dougie didn't need to be at daycare that day. I was writing my dissertation, which is why we had him signed up for daycare at all. But I didn't even plan to write that day. Curt was home sick after chemo, and I took Dougie to daycare to keep him out of my way while I took care of Curt. I didn't want him under foot. And he never was again."

"Jesus, Lilli. You can't blame yourself for that!"

She smiled wryly at him. "Are you—*you*—seriously sitting there and telling me that I can't feel guilty about something? Seriously? The Master of Guilt?"

He chuckled a little. "Okay, you have a point. But still . . ."

She interrupted. "I've come to terms with it. I have. Without the benefit of foresight, we have to make the best choices we can with the information we have. A whole slew of things could have shifted just slightly, and Dougie would have been safe. Or I could have kept him home and *I* might have been distracted helping Curt, and Dougie could've gotten hurt at home. The world laughs.

"But I know you understand that it's very hard to live with the knowledge that a choice you made put events like that in motion, even if you know you made the best choice you could."

"Curt didn't blame me. I think he blamed himself, if anything. For being sick. We never really recovered from losing Dougie. *Curt* never really recovered. He never had a hopeful test result afterwards. He stopped working. He stopped fighting to get better. He just slowly wasted away, the cancer metastasizing until I think he had more cancer cells than healthy ones. He'd been a pretty big, fit guy. Took care of himself, like I do. We met at a 10K, in fact. When he died, he

was a husk. A husk who had forgotten his whole life. I guess there's some peace in not remembering that you had to bury your two-year-old.

“Anyway, then I was alone. I sat in this house for weeks and stewed in impotent fury. And then I decided I needed to either kill myself or figure out a life for myself. No way I was going to take my mother's coward's way out, so I figured out a life.”

She stopped and gave him a shy, sideways look. “So, that's my story.”

Opie pulled her into his arms and just held her. Words weren't necessary. They really weren't.

He understood that normal people would have known all that about each other long before they got married, but that's not how he and Lilli worked. Or, at least, it hadn't been. But she was right; they needed a new plan. Their love was powerful, but it was not invulnerable.

Even though he didn't understand what had happened to his dad any better than he had when he stood over his decaying body, he felt more in control of himself and his thoughts now. Talking with Lilli had helped him to understand why the club was so important to him, despite everything. He thought that, with Lilli on his side, he was strong enough to leave it behind. Or to stay and make it better. With Lilli, he could do anything.

They were both exhausted. Opie stretched out on the couch and pulled her to lie on him, chest to chest. He tucked her head under his chin and wrapped his arms around her. Then they slept together in the midday sun.

Chapter 27

Jax's cover-up had worked, and everyone thought that Laroy's crew had shot Clay. Clay was alive, and it looked like he would survive. Clay, who'd killed Donna and Piney, would be back at the table. Opie was struggling to work through that, but he was letting Lilli help him.

Jax and Tara were not leaving Charming. Instead, Jax had taken the gavel, and he'd decided that the information about what Clay had done would break SAMCRO. And so it was a secret, one that Opie was working very hard to make sense of. Jax, Opie, and Clay were the only Sons who knew that Clay had killed Piney and that Opie had shot him. Lilli, Tara, Gemma, Ratso, and Unser closed the loop. It was a pretty big loop, actually. Hard to keep a secret with so many moving parts.

In the days after the shooting, hell had broken loose. Bobby had been arrested. Tig, believing the story about how Clay had gotten shot, had gone rogue and attacked Laroy, killing his girlfriend. Chibs and Jax had gone to help him get away, and now they were all caught up in something Lilli didn't understand—and, frankly, she was tired of the whole fucking mess and didn't care to understand. Opie was clear of it, and that's what really mattered to her.

It took Opie a couple of weeks to even think about returning to the clubhouse, and he still wasn't sure if he fit there any longer. The story about Piney was that his death was the result of the cartel war. After paying their respects, everybody gave him his space, and Opie stayed away, trying to make some decisions.

But, in the end, Opie was a Son. That was his family. Who he was. Lilli knew he wouldn't be able to stay away for long, and she could almost physically see him get pulled back. The truth of it was, she was glad. She would have packed up and moved away with him without a second thought, but she understood that staying was the right call for him. He needed to be a Son. Without SAMCRO, he didn't know who he was. In the two weeks he stayed away, he was unmoored.

They'd continued to talk a lot about what he was feeling and what he wanted to do, and she'd tried to help him sort through his tangle of emotions about the club. He was recovering from the shock of losing his dad the way he had. He was working hard to stay open and connected to her. Though he was somber and out of sorts, he'd been devoted and loving with her since that awful night, drawing strength and maybe some peace from their bond.

But he wasn't quite Opie. He'd lost something. She knew where he could find it. So she was relieved when she came out of the bedroom in the morning to see him sitting at the kitchen island, wearing his kutte again. When she walked up to him, he pulled her close. "Would you have a problem if I went to the clubhouse today?"

She kissed his forehead. "You know I wouldn't, love. I'm glad to see it. Clay's still in the hospital, right?"

“Yeah. It’s one reason I want to go now. I can’t be there when he is. Not yet, anyway. Maybe someday, but not yet. Right now, I’ll kill him if I see him.”

He shook his head sharply as if knocking the dark thoughts away. “Anyway, he won’t be there, so now’s a good time for me to go.”

She put her hand on his face and caressed his cheek with her thumb. “Okay. You going to be gone all day then?”

“I doubt it. I want to get my pop’s trike up cleaned up and ready for sale. But I don’t know if I’ll be able to stay. Maybe. Depends on who’s around.”

She brushed his hair back. “You stay as long as you want. I’ll be working this morning. And I’ll see if Tara wants to get lunch or something.”

He looked at her. “I am so lucky that you love me. Even after everything that’s happened, I feel lucky, because I have you.”

She pressed her lips to his. He squeezed her closer and slid his tongue into her mouth. They kissed deeply until Opie pulled back with a groan. “If I don’t leave now, I’m not gonna.”

Lilli laughed. “Scoot then. I’m going to go for a run and then get to work.”

They kissed again at the door. Lilli grabbed his beard and gave his chin a little shake. “I’ll see you later. I love you.”

“Love you, babe.”

*

Lilli felt pretty content. Opie had been much more himself that morning. She thought maybe she could see the fading end of this bad road on the horizon. It was a cool, sunny morning—perfect for a nice long run to start the day. And, hey, maybe they’d finally open their wedding presents after he got home. Almost a month after the wedding, they were still stacked in the living room.

She dressed for a run and clipped her little iPod to her top. She took a few minutes to warm up, then put her earbuds in and cranked up The Clash. Good to get the heart really pumping. She started down the road.

She was miles into her run and in the zone, British punk banging in her ears, so she didn’t hear or see the SUV pull up behind her. She was unconscious before she knew anything was wrong.

Chapter 28

Opie had intended only to get Piney's trike cleaned up and get a "For Sale" sign posted on it, but Chibs and Juice had called him over. He found he couldn't just ignore them, and he'd ended up getting sucked back in. He'd spent the whole day at the clubhouse.

Now, he was sitting at the bar with most of the Sons. It had been awkward at first, the truth about Clay looming large in his head. It was hard to listen to their expressions of concern for the man who'd killed his dad, especially as they came in almost the same breath with condolences for Piney. But Sons have lots of secrets to keep—even from each other, apparently—so he dealt. By midday, he was more or less back in a groove, and he'd ended up staying.

He and Jax weren't talking much, but they'd exchanged several looks heavy with meaning. He wasn't sure how to get right with his friend. He was going to have to figure that out if he was going to stay.

He'd tried to call Lilli earlier in the afternoon but had had to leave a message, and he hadn't heard back. No big deal—she was going to lunch with Tara, and it wasn't unlike her to go a few hours without checking her messages when she was busy. He was getting worried, but he'd been with Lilli long enough to know he was better off chewing on the worry for a while. Even after everything that had happened, the surest way to piss her off was to start hunting her down because he hadn't heard from her in a few hours.

He looked at the clock over the bar—well, more than a few hours now. It was coming up on five hours since his message, another five since he'd actually seen her. He called again. Voice mail. He hung up without leaving another message and turned to Jax.

"Have you heard from Tara? Is Lilli with her? I can't get hold of her, and she said she was going to try to see Tara and the kids today."

Jax pulled out his phone. "I don't know. I'll ask."

Lilli was not with Tara. Tara hadn't heard from her all day.

Now his heart was pounding. He tried to stay cool. "I'm going to the house—I want to make sure everything's okay."

Chibs asked, "You want someone with you?"

Juice cut in. "Guys, something's up." He was looking at the video monitor showing the closed front gate, and everyone followed his eyes. A dark SUV was pulled up alongside the gate, its hatch up.

Jax said, "What the fuck?" They all pulled their weapons just as three men threw something over the gate, leaving it dangling. They jumped into their vehicle and tore away.

It looked like a body.

They all ran out, guns drawn. Chibs was in the lead. Suddenly, he stopped short, yelled “No, Ope! Wait!” and tore forward as fast as he could.

Opie heard him, but it didn’t make sense. He ran forward, and, as Chibs got to the gate, Opie recognized Lilli. He screamed.

She was hanging from a thick nylon rope binding her hands. She was naked. She was bruised and bloody and oh so badly hurt. She was unconscious—or worse. A knife was stuck in her chest, pinning a bloody sheet of notebook paper to her. In large, uneven block letters it read: “PAYBACK IS A BITCH.”

He pushed everyone else away and lifted her up, trying to cover her and save her all at once. “Get her down get her down oh my God get her down! Lilli!”

Chibs climbed the gate and used his switchblade to cut through the rope. Lilli fell into Opie’s arms, and he went to the ground cradling her. He rocked her, sobbing, trying to cover her exposed body. “Oh babe, oh babe. No, God.”

He heard Jax yell, “Get to Tara and Gemma NOW. NOW! They’re going for the women!”

Chibs cut her hands loose. He checked for a pulse. “Ope, she’s alive.” To the others he yelled, “Call an ambulance NOW!”

She had been tortured. There was no other way to see it. Opie couldn’t *not* see it. Her face was badly mangled, her lips split, one eye completely swollen shut. She had been slashed in so many places: Her face. Her stomach. Her arms. Her breasts. Her legs. Her body was slick with blood and covered in deep, dark bruises. He recognized their shape: fists, fingers, boots. Her hands were a mess, her knuckles torn and bloody, her nails shredded. She’d fought hard. Of course she had. His warrior woman.

She came to and took a wet, heaving breath and flailed weakly, clearly panicked but without the strength to fight. He clutched her closer. “Lilli, it’s me. I’m here, babe, I got you. It’s over. No one’s going to hurt you now. Hang on for me.” She was struggling to take air; he could hear the blood in her lungs.

He went to pull out the knife and get that horrible fucking paper off her, but Chibs stopped him “Ope, no! You have to leave it, brutha. She could bleed out.”

Somebody carefully spread a kutte over her, steering clear of the knife. Opie looked up: it was Juice. He was crying.

Opie looked down at her. She was staring back at him with her one open eye, clear grey and sparkling with tears. She was fighting for air, bringing up bubbles of blood with every labored exhale. “Chibs, help me,” he pleaded. “What do I do?”

Chibs took her hand. He was crying, too. “Hey, lovely. It’s gonna be all right, yeah?” To Opie he said, “there’s nothin’ we can do, Ope. We have to wait for the ambulance. They’ll be here any minute—there. They’re comin’.” Then Opie could finally hear sirens in the distance.

Lilli struggled to lift her head. She looked down at her chest. Then she looked at Chibs. She pulled her hand out of his. Opie could see something dawn on Chibs’ face. Chibs pleaded, “No, Lilli! It doesn’t matter,” and reached to take her hand again. But with strength and speed no one expected, she grabbed the knife and pulled it out of her chest. Her head fell back and she forced a wheezing, wet gasp.

Opie bellowed. “Lilli, no! God no!” She dropped the knife and grabbed at the paper, wadding it up into a bloody clump. She reached out to Chibs and opened her hand. He took it, weeping.

She was protecting the club.

Lilli turned back to Opie. Her hand came up and grabbed his kutte. Her chest and throat were working *so hard* to move air, but he could see her fading. “Babe, you have to stay with me. *Please*. I love you so much. You can’t go. I need you. *Please*.” Blood was now streaming out of her mouth. She was drowning while he held her, and he was helpless to stop it. He looked toward the road, for the ambulance, but she pulled on his kutte again. He looked down at her face, her beautiful, perfect face from which shone everything good in his life.

She pulled on him again. He leaned down and kissed her gently. “I love you,” he whispered. She put her hand on his cheek and tried to shape her battered mouth into a smile. She grabbed his beard and gave his chin a little shake. And then she was quiet.

Her hand dropped. A tear rolled out of her open eye and down her cheek, leaving a trail through blood.

She was gone.

Opie howled and pulled her to his chest.

Chapter 29

It took Chibs, Jax, and Juice to pull Opie away from her. The EMTs worked on her for fifteen minutes, but Lilli had died in Opie's arms. He just knelt in the lot until they called her time of death, and when they'd packed up he crawled back and gathered her body to his chest. The ambulance left on another call. The sheriff stayed and took statements. He didn't bother Opie.

Tig came back tailing Gemma, and Happy followed Tara and the boys in. Tara parked the car and ran to Opie and Lilli, dropping to her knees. She put her arms around them both and wept. Opie didn't even notice. She got up after a while and Jax folded her into his arms.

Everyone went into the clubhouse except Jax and Tara, who kept vigil at a distance.

Skeeter came with the hearse about an hour after the cops left. Opie was still kneeling in the lot, rocking Lilli's cooling body. He hadn't made a sound for that whole hour. Jax went up to him then. He squatted down next to his friend. "Ope. Skeeter's here. It's time to let her go."

Opie turned a look of unfiltered loathing on him. "Let her go? Let her go? Fuck you, *brother*. She's it. There is nothing else."

Jax squeezed off his tears. "I know. God, Ope. I'm so fucking sorry. But she's lying out here on the ground, naked in the dark. Let Skeeter take her. Let her have a better goodbye than this."

Opie collapsed into sobs again. He kissed her cool lips and held her tight. Then he laid her gently on the ground. Still he knelt at her side. Jax stood up behind him and pulled on his shoulders. He didn't resist and came up to his feet.

Skeeter rolled the gurney with its black bag over to them. He started to pick the bag up, but Opie stopped him. "No. Just open it." Skeeter nodded and opened the bag over the gurney. Opie lifted Lilli off the ground and placed her in it. He kissed her forehead. He kissed her lips. He kissed her hands. He zipped up the bag, stopping to pull Juice's kutte out before he closed it completely.

He watched as Skeeter pushed the gurney into the back of the hearse and closed the hatch. He watched him drive Lilli away. Then he turned around without a word and went into the clubhouse.

With a nod, he handed Juice his kutte and then walked straight past everyone and went into the chapel. He sat at his seat. He looked straight ahead. He waited. He was covered in Lilli's blood. It was on his chest, his legs, his arms, his hands. His face. His beard. He could taste it. He sat, and he waited.

The rest of the Sons filed silently in and sat at their places, Jax at the gavel. The room was quiet. Opie looked straight ahead.

Jax cleared his throat. "There's not much question that what happened to Lilli is retaliation for Laroy's girlfriend getting killed."

Tig looked down. He was crying. “That’s me. This is on me. Christ, Ope.” he whispered.

Opie said nothing. He didn’t even turn his head.

Jax said, “There’s a lot of people it’s on, Tig. What we need to do right now is figure out how to handle it.” He paused and looked around. “Veronica Pope was Damon Pope’s daughter. Pope stays far away from the blood. I can’t believe he would get his hands dirty like this, even for his daughter. It’s gotta be Laroy. But we need to be sure—*sure*—we go after the right people, in the right way. Pope could destroy us with a phone call.”

Chibs slammed his fist on the table. “Jackie, you *canna*’ be saying we do *nothin*’ for Lilli! What they did to her!”

Jax looked at Opie, who hadn’t moved.

“I’m saying that we don’t do anything stupid. We make sure first. We’ve done enough stupid shit in the past couple of years to last the rest of our goddamn lives. We get retaliation for Lilli—and Opie—but we do it smart.”

Chibs shoved his chair back in disgust, but he said nothing more.

Still Opie had not moved. Jax looked at him. “Ope . . .”

Finally, he moved. He looked down at his hands, running his fingers back and forth through the thickening blood that covered them. He put his fingers to his mouth and wiped some of the blood from his lips. He looked at Jax. Staring coldly at his best friend, he pushed two fingers in a long line across the table, leaving a trail of Lilli’s blood behind.

Then he stood up and walked out of the chapel and out of the clubhouse.

Epilogue

Opie was in Lilli's garden, standing in the little nook they'd made together in the spring. The fountain babbled behind him. The pathway lights glowed warmly. Everything here was just as she'd left it. Everything here was her.

His attention in the chapel had been laser sharp. He'd heard every word. He understood that Lilli would not be avenged. There wasn't anything smart about vengeance. It wasn't brains, it was blood. Blood for blood.

Her blood had dried to a hard crust on his skin. He could feel its pull.

But he knew that Jax was right. Damon Pope could destroy the club. Acting on him, or anyone protected by him, would end the Sons.

And he knew that what happened to Lilli fell on the Sons more than it fell on Pope or Laroy or any Niner.

Tig had killed Pope's daughter, Laroy's girlfriend. He'd done it in retaliation for what had happened to Clay. But the Niners didn't have anything to do with what happened to Clay.

He'd shot Clay. And Jax had blamed it on black.

He'd shot Clay because Clay had killed his father. And Donna.

The blame for Lilli's death rested squarely on the fucking table.

She had loved the Sons as her family. With almost her last breath, she had tried to protect them. But the Sons were destroying themselves.

He didn't know what to do with any of that. How to live with it.

He had given almost everything up to SAMCRO, and SAMCRO had taken it all and demanded more. Five years of his life in Chino. Donna. His children. His father. And now Lilli. Beautiful, brilliant, badass Lilli, who had asked nothing of him but what he freely offered, who had given him all of herself in every way he needed, and who had loved him completely and unconditionally.

His wife. His love. His peace.

He fell to his knees. He curled his fists into the loose soil of the new flower bed and silently screamed. He knelt like that, curled into himself, rocking.

Then, he sat back. In the midst of the chaotic agony in his mind and heart, he'd found a pinpoint of clarity.

He had only one thing left to give to the Sons. He wouldn't give it recklessly. He would make sure it mattered. But he would give it. And then his sacrifice would be complete.

THE END