

Title: The Lost King

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Summary: When an outsider brings trouble into Charming, all Chibs and Jarry want to do is protect the things and people they care about. But their different ideas about what needs protecting and how to do that put them on a collision course.

The Lost King By Scribblesinink

"Jaysus!" Chibs strode over to Jarry, standing next to the wreckage of her Honda: a mangled heap of red steel at the edge of the road. "You whole?"

She gave a shaky nod. "Yeah. Can't say the same for the suit." She showed him where her slide across the rough asphalt had shredded her leathers. Reddened skin showed through the lacerations: she hadn't escaped completely without injury.

He touched her torn-up sleeve with two fingers. The leathers' legs hadn't fared any better. "Christ." When she'd called, asking for the truck and explaining she'd laid down the bike after her rear tire had slipped on some loose sand, he hadn't realized how close she'd come to serious harm.

They'd hardly spoken in the past few weeks, after she'd released them from the town's lock-up following the scrap at Diosa. Though she'd let them out with nothing more than a stern warning and talked the three aggrieved clients out of pressing charges, Chibs hadn't been too sure how well she'd understood what he'd been trying to tell her about why things had needed to go down the way they had. He'd thought it best to give her the time and space to process.

Not that he'd had much of a choice; club work had kept him busier than a one-armed paper hanger. First off, they'd been rebuilding Diosa. Then the garage had needed getting up and running after they'd bought it from Wendy. That had meant renegotiating the maintenance contracts with both Oswald and Hale, and there'd been a ton of other paperwork to deal with. Just when he hoped to get a breather and see if Jarry was still upset, the Irish had made their long-awaited move: he and the club had spent a few days hip deep in violent shite to support

Alvarez and get Malone to safety. Thankfully, none of it had spilled over into Charming before the Irish had slunk off with their tails between their legs, and the alliances had remained intact.

He watched her now as she hugged herself, her pale face evidence that the adrenaline was wearing off. He'd missed her. More than he'd realized. "You a'right, luv?" he asked again, his voice low.

"Told you, I'm fine." But he could see she was shaking with the come-down.

"Here." He ducked into the truck's cab and grabbed a hoodie from the seat. "Put this on. It'll keep ye warm. And ye should wait in the truck; me 'n Rat can handle this mess. And then I'll take ye home."

It was a sign of how shaken up she was that she draped the hoodie around her shoulders and climbed into the cab without a single word of protest. Was she really okay? Or was she pretending to be the tough broad and faking it? Perhaps, after they dropped off the wrecked Honda, he should take her to St. Thomas and have her checked over.

"Just take me home, please," she'd insisted an hour later, after they'd dumped what was left of her bike at Redwood Auto. Tig had taken one look and declared it *rice rocket stew*. "Good night's sleep and I'll be fine."

However, she hadn't objected when he took her to his place instead. Nor did she complain about him helping her out of the torn leathers and putting her to bed.

oOo

Jarry woke, stiff and sore, in a bed that wasn't her own. Sunlight slanted through curtains that were equally unfamiliar. As she grew used to the brightness, she made out the flag hanging on the opposite wall: white slashes on a blue background. She was in Chibs' bedroom. He'd explained the wall decoration—the Scottish flag—the first time she'd been here.

How'd she end up in Chibs' bed this time? It took another few moments for her sleep-fuzzy brain to dig up enough memories to make sense of it: after she'd binned the bike, Chibs had taken her home. His home; not hers. She had a vague recollection of him washing the grit out of her scrapes and giving her a drink and some pills. After that—? Her memory supplied nothing. Painkillers and booze: not a great combination.

As she woke further, she became aware she was dressed in her panties and bra, and a too-large shirt that smelled of Chibs—cigarettes and leather—and that she was alone. She drew in a deeper breath, detecting other smells mingling with

the scent of the shirt. Coffee, for one, and—was that bacon? Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten for a while, and she sat up. Tried to, at least. She'd stiffened up overnight and a whimper escaped her as she forced her abused muscles into action. Where the asphalt had scraped her skin—it would've been so much worse if she'd not been wearing her leathers—the abrasions stung. Ow.

"Morning, luv." Chibs appeared in the doorway, propping himself against the frame. He was bare-foot, wearing a wife beater and jeans with the top button undone. He watched her across the rim of a steaming mug.

"That coffee?" Jarry asked, her voice scratchy with sleep.

"Aye." He smiled, cheeks dimpling. "Want some?"

She didn't even bother to joke that, as a Scot, he should be drinking tea. "God, yes." She struggled to sit up straighter, the effort eliciting another groan she couldn't hold back. Chibs was at her side in a heartbeat, setting his mug down on the side table and arranging the pillows so she could lean against them. She blinked up at him, a laugh escaping her. "Are *you* okay?"

He looked down at her in confusion. "I didn't put a bike down yesterday."

"No, but—." She gestured helplessly. "What's with the Mother Theresa act?"

Chibs' face shuttered the instant the words left her mouth, and she immediately regretted them.

"Sorry."

He grunted something unintelligible and left the room, returning several minutes later holding a second mug as well as a bottle of pills. He offered both to her without speaking.

She took the mug and ignored the pills. "I am sorry about what I said. I appreciate you taking care of me. It's just, uh, a little weird." She combed a snag from her hair with her free hand, and the gesture tore at another strained muscle. She winced again. "Ow."

Chibs sighed and shook a couple of the pills out onto his palm. "Eat up. They're generic naproxen. Won't knock ye out but'll help with the soreness." He'd been a medic once, she recalled.

Reluctantly, she accepted the pills, washing them down with the coffee, which was perfect: hot, black and strong. "Thanks." She looked at the sun outside the window. "What time is it?"

"Little after nine."

"What?" Shock made her forget her aching body and she flung the blankets off her. "Why'd you let me sleep so long?" She put the mug on the nightstand and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Ow, again. She grimaced, pushing through the soreness. "I gotta—." She had to talk to Eglee and set Carreira to digging into the intel she collected. Should've done that last night, really, except it had been nice to let Chibs take care of everything and to simply... *be*.

"Whoa...." She swayed on her feet

Chibs grabbed her by the elbow to steady her. "—Gotta take it easy," he finished for her, chuckling.

"You having fun at my expense, Scotty?" She pinned him with a glare. "What d'you do to me, anyway?"

"I'm not laughing at ye." His face grew serious. "And I didn't *do* anything. That was a nasty spill, Althea. You're pretty banged up. Take a day. Town'll survive."

oOo

An hour later, the medication had kicked in, and a hot shower had loosened her up further. Aside from the cuts and bruises, and the occasional twinge every time overstretched muscles protested a sudden movement, Jarry was pretty much feeling like her old self.

It was only when she stepped out of the shower stall and wrapping a towel around herself that she remembered she had no clothes other than her funky underwear and the shredded leathers. A quick search through Chibs' closet unearthed a clean if too-large shirt—she rolled her eyes at the faded reaper logo prominent on her chest—and a pair of boxers that didn't threaten to instantly fall from her hips.

Finishing toweling off her hair and letting the towel fall to her side, she walked into the kitchen. Chibs, busy at the stove, snuck a peek at her over his shoulder and whistled softly through his teeth. "Looks good on ye."

She grimaced, resisting the urge to stick out her tongue at him. "Don't get used to it." At his waved invitation, she sat at the table where a place had been set for her, with a fresh mug of steaming coffee already waiting. Tossing the damp towel onto the corner of the table, she reached for the mug. "Think you can run me back to my place later?"

"Sure." Chibs was scooping sizzling eggs and a strip of bacon onto a plate. He placed it in front of her. "Hope you like yer eggs scrambled."

"Yes, that's fine, thanks." She reached for the knife and fork, trying not to notice that he was standing near enough she could feel his body heat. She still instinctively started when he reached out and smoothed down her hair, tucking the loose strands behind her ear.

She shook him off, torn between irritation and a strange sense of comfort at the intimacy of the gesture. He remained where he was for a moment longer before crossing to the kitchen sink to rinse off the skillet he'd been using and adding it to a stack of other dirty dishes.

Turning to face her, he settled himself against the counter's edge. "So, wanta tell me what really happened?"

She looked up from attacking her eggs. "I told you, it was a patch of sand and —."

"Bullshit."

She dropped her fork, knitting her brows together. "Are you calling me a liar?"

He crossed his arms. "Don't give me that crock, Althea. There wasn't enough sand to cause a spill. And remember, I've seen ye ride."

She puffed out a breath, the anger flooding out of her. It wasn't directed at him, anyway. "Some D-bag ran me off the road."

"What?" That sure got his attention. He pushed away from the counter and put his hands on the table, leaning toward her. "Who—? Which bastard—?" He took a breath. "Did you at least get a plate?"

"Yes, I did." She picked up her fork again and continued eating. "And no, I'm not telling you. This is police business, Chibs."

His jaw twitched. "What the hell's that mean?"

Again, she sighed. She looked away. Better tell him the whole story, or he'd start digging, out of a misguided sense of honor or something. "Okay. I was riding, going nowhere in particular. For fun, you know?"

Chibs straightened, giving her a nod, one biker to another.

"When I passed by Diller Point, I turned in. Don't ask me why, I got no clue." She smiled. "Call it cop instinct. Anyway, there were a couple cars parked side by side at the far end of the lot, near the boulders."

Again, Chibs dipped his head to indicate he knew where she meant and to encourage her to go on.

"One car had three kids in it. Two boys, one girl. High schoolers, I think." Nothing strange about that: the Point was a popular place for kids to hang out. It had been the second car that had drawn her attention. "The other car was a lone guy. Adult."

She'd also made out greasy stubble, a meaningless tat on the wrist resting in the window, and a faded green ball cap, none of which were details Chibs needed to hear to understand what had happened—or that it would be wise to share. She hadn't forgotten the conversation they'd had in the sheriff's interrogation room a month ago—how could she, when the sight of him in cuffs had made her want to jump his bones, even though, at the same time, she'd been livid at the trouble Samcro had caused? But it was *her* job to uphold the law in Charming, and she wasn't gonna give Chibs enough intel to allow him to go haring off after some smalltime crook.

"Aye?" he prodded, when she'd remained quiet for too long.

"The kids left soon as they saw me." She picked up the story. "The guy after a few minutes of watching me, like he was waiting for me to do something. Then he left, too."

"Drug dealer?"

She shrugged, the movement reminding her that her muscles and ligaments had been forced to do things they were never meant to do. "Didn't see anything change hands. But we got a couple reports of strung-out kids at the High School. And St. Thomas dealt with an OD the other day. Thankfully, nobody's died." Yet. She left the word unspoken.

"Jaysus, fuck." Chibs scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She lifted her brows, not rewarding the question with an actual answer.

Chibs scoffed ruefully. "Right."

"Anyway," she went on, "the whole thing smelled fishy. Enough to set off my spidey sense." She grinned. "I figured I'd follow the dude for a bit, see where it led."

"And he caught on and decided he didn't want ye on his tail," Chibs concluded. "Christ, Althea."

"Yeah." She forked up the last bit of her breakfast. "If anything," she added

around a mouthful of egg, "that only confirmed I was right to be suspicious. The douche was definitely up to no good up there at the Point." She put down her fork and pushed the plate toward Chibs. "Thanks for this. But now I have to—." As she thrust her seat back and tried to stand, another wave of dizziness washed over her. Chibs caught her before she could stumble, and lowered her gently back on to the chair.

"Sure you don't wanta go to St. Thomas?"

"Yeah, just need a sec." The last thing she wanted was to have a doctor prod her bruises or poke needles into her.

"A'right." Thankfully, Chibs didn't argue this time. "But why don't ye stay here for the day. Call it in to Eglee and tell her what ye know." He slid his cellphone across the table. "Use mine. Yours is a goner, I'm afraid." He tilted his head toward a crumbled heap of broken plastic and tiny circuit boards at the far end of the kitchen counter that vaguely resembled her Blackberry.

"Shit." She'd forgotten she'd had to use a passing motorist's cell to call the garage. The guy had wanted to call the cops too, but she'd told him not to bother. She thought about Chibs' suggestion. Truth was, she was still feeling pretty shaky. As much from the actual crash—she hadn't been an indestructible angry twenty-one year old for a long time—as from the near miss. She'd been on the force long enough she'd faced death a couple times, but never alone or without backup. "Alright," she conceded, picking up the phone. She gestured with it. "Can you—?" She didn't want him to overhear.

He gave her a brief grin but retreated into the bedroom without protest while she made the call. She could hear him pattering around noisily enough it was clear he wasn't trying to listen in, so she told Eglee everything she'd got so far. "Call me if anything comes up," she finished, as Chibs came back.

He halted in the doorway. "Jaysus, Jarry. Look at ye."

Following his gaze, she looked down. Now that she'd moved the chair away from the table, the abrasions and bruises on her bare legs were in full view, standing out starkly on her pale skin. Her left leg was particularly spectacular: a long strip of road rash on the outside where the leather had failed to protect her against the full impact of the asphalt, and the inside black and purple where it had gone under the bike. She'd been damned lucky she hadn't broken the leg—or worse. But that fucking asshole was gonna pay for it.

Chibs had walked closer. Now he knelt and touched the angry red scabs with a light finger. "Should put some ointment on this," he muttered. "It'll calm the skin and keep it from scarring."

Without waiting for a response, he got up and headed for the bathroom, returning a moment later with a tube of antiseptic cream. Jarry held out her hand for the tube, but he ignored her and instead crouched in front of her, gesturing for her to turn the chair around to give him better access. "Uh, what—?" She laughed, nervously, and he looked up from uncapping the tube. The rest of her words died on her lips at the look in his eyes. She swallowed hard.

Pinching a few drops of the ointment onto his fingers, Chibs began to smear it over the cuts. It stung a little, at first, but his touch was soft and light. Soon the burning had faded completely and the brush of his fingers on her skin turned soothing. She sighed, closing her eyes and giving in to the sensation.

The ointment applied, Chibs' fingers moved on to tracing the bruises. When his lips joined his fingers, her eyes flew open and she was confronted with the top of his head between her thighs.

"Ye got damned fuckin' lucky, luv," he mumbled against her skin. She made an involuntary noise, and he looked up, his eyes dark. Alarm bells were going off in the far reaches of her mind but before she could say or do anything, his fingers had slipped under the edges of the boxer's legs, caressing the soft skin where her legs joined her hips.

"Chibs." She sighed his name, partly plea, partly objection. His response was to tug on the boxers, and she automatically lifted her ass up from the chair far enough that he could slide them off and down her legs until she could kick them away. He pulled her forward on the chair until she was perched at the edge of the seat, leaning back against the chair's straight back. Still kneeling, Chibs spread her knees wider and inched forward between them. "Uh, I don't think I'm up to—," she protested, though the stiffness in her entire body had taken a backseat to the low, heavy throbbing in her core.

"Ssh," he whispered, his breath caressing her. "I'll take care o' ye."

His promise seemed to hold a deeper meaning beyond the moment, but she had no chance to question him as he shifted forward and sucked her clit between his lips. All thought fled from her mind and it was all she could do not to clench her legs tightly around him, whether to escape the sensation of his mouth on her or to seek it further, she didn't know. She tangled her fingers in his hair, holding on for dear life, as he brought her to a peak.

Still shaking and panting, her inner muscles trembling, she came back to the world. Chibs was sitting back on his heels, grinning smugly, his goatee glistening with her juices. "Good, eh?"

She swatted weakly at him. "That was fuckin' amazing," she admitted. "I should put down a bike more often if it makes you do that."

The smirk melted from his face, replaced by something that looked angry. "Don't —." He broke off and took a deep breath. "No more *Die Hard* shit, a'right?"

She laughed. "Going after a drug dealer? That's hardly *Die Hard* material. I just —."

He pushed up on to his knees and grabbed her elbows, his fingers digging in almost painfully. "Please."

She stared into his eyes, mere inches from hers, shocked to silence. He wasn't joking. She turned her head away, the intensity of his gaze too much to bear. "You know I can't promise that, Filip. I'm a cop. It's what I do."

"Fuck." He pushed away from her and jumped to his feet. Picking up the towel she'd discarded earlier, he wiped off his chin, grabbed the ointment and carried both tube and towel back to the bathroom.

She used his absence as a chance to snatch up the boxers and pull them back on, grateful she could use the chair for balance as she lifted first one foot and then the other.

She'd finished dressing by the time he returned. He tossed her a bundled-up pair of sweat pants before shrugging into his cut. "Put these on. I'll take ye home."

o0o

Engine idling, Chibs waited until Jarry's apartment door closed, cutting her off from view. Putting the truck in gear, he stepped on the gas. The wheels spun for a moment, until they caught and the truck jumped forward.

Damn woman. Didn't she understand what kind of dangerous shite she was putting herself in? She oughtta know better than go after suspected drug dealers on her own. Without even fuckin' bothering to tell anyone what she was doing.

Her amused tolerance as she'd listened to his instructions before he'd let her climb out of the truck—take it easy; go see a doc if there's any sign of nausea or double vision—had pissed him off even more than he already was.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles were white. If only the wheel was the filthy scunner's neck.... That bastard could've fuckin' killed her, and that kinda shite just didn't fly.

Reaching Redwood Auto, he turned in, ready to exchange the truck for his bike. For once, he had no eyes for the freshly painted signs with the garage's new name. Usually, the boards gave him a pang of pride and sadness mixed together;

they'd achieved so much after Jax died. Parking the truck, he killed the engine, taking five to figure out his next move.

Jarry deliberately putting herself in harm's way was plain fucked up and he didn't know how to deal with that. And then when he'd asked—*begged*—her to never to put herself into that position again, she'd refused to make that promise. Did she think she was invulnerable?

He huffed a laugh. At least he'd known better than to argue with her about the details of the case—or let on about what he was planning to do once he got a hold of the psycho piece of shite who'd forced her off the road. He'd heard plenty enough of what she'd told Eglee when she'd called it in—the walls in his apartment were thin and there was nothing wrong with his hearing—and he'd ask Eglee for the rest while Rat and Montez set to getting a twenty on the guy. They weren't Juice, but they were learning and they'd deliver; he was sure of it. And once they knew where to find the prick, he'd take Tig and Hap and show the guy what Samcro thought of dirty little bastards dealing drugs in Charming.

And if Jarry didn't like it? She could go fuck herself. At least she'd be safe.

o0o

Though he was still kinda pissed at her as he approached her apartment that evening, he wanted to make sure she was doing okay. The stubborn broad was so bullheaded it wouldn't surprise him if she'd gone in to work in spite of his warning—or because of it. She certainly wouldn't've called a doctor if she gotten any worse.

Shifting the Chinese take-out he was carrying into one hand, he knocked on the door. The food was a peace offering for snapping at her in the morning. Not that he'd changed his mind about him being in the right and her being in the wrong.

After a minute, long enough for her to have checked the peephole, the door opened. So at least she wasn't ignoring him entirely. He saw she'd changed out of his oversized clothes and into a shirt and yoga pants of her own. Smiling, he held up the bag. "Hey. Brought you orange chicken with brown rice."

She eyed him a moment, her expression carefully neutral. He'd hoped for a smile, if nothing else. Then she puffed out a huff and pulled the door open wider, stepping back and allowing him inside.

He let out a relieved breath as he carried the bag into her kitchen nook, shed his cut and draped it over a kitchen chair, and started rummaging through her cupboards. They weren't stocked with much, but over the past few months, he'd been at her place often enough to be able to find a couple of plates. A few minutes later, they were side by side on her sofa, beers in front of them on the

low table, and each with a heaped plate in their lap and chopsticks in hand.

They didn't talk while they ate, Jarry attacking her food in a way that made Chibs wonder if she'd eaten anything since he'd cooked her breakfast that morning. "How're ye feelin'?" he asked at last, laying down his chopsticks. "Headaches? Any dizziness?" He didn't bother to ask if she was experiencing nausea; she wouldn't have inhaled the chicken at that speed if she was feeling sick.

She rolled her eyes at him, dropping her own chopsticks onto her plate. "No, *Mom*." Chibs reined in his irritation; he wasn't in the mood for another fight. His feelings must've shown on his face, all the same, and she added in a more agreeable tone, "Just stiff all over, is all. That salve of yours really helped with the scrapes, so thank you."

Somewhat mollified, Chibs collected their empty plates, carried them into the kitchen and trashed the boxes and chopsticks. Ducking into the fridge, he grabbed a couple more beers and returned to the sofa. She stayed where she was, watching him putter around her place with a slight smile curving up her mouth. He pretended not to notice. He was whipped, alright, and he couldn't seem to give a damn.

She shook her head at the beer, and he set it on the table, unopened, before popping his own and taking a swallow. "I can also help ye with the stiffness."

Her smile grew into a toothy grin. "Another of your miracle cures?"

"Aye." He winked and set down his beer. He offered her his hand, pulled her to her feet, and led her toward her bedroom. He knew the way well enough. "Get naked and lie down on the bed," he ordered. She cocked her head, scanning his face, and for a minute he thought she either didn't trust him, or she was going to object to being bossed around just for the sake of objecting. He braced himself for an argument, but then she nodded and shimmied out of her yoga pants.

He ducked into her bathroom in search of her lotion. Coming back, he found her on her stomach on the bed, as he'd asked, naked except for a pair of panties and with her cheek cradled on a pillow. She angled her head so she could watch him as he kicked off his boots, took off his rings, and crawled on the bed to kneel by her hips. Pouring a good amount of lotion onto his palms, he set to work, kneading her back and legs and arms, mindful of the splotches of road rash and the various bruises. She'd been right: she was stiff as a board, but her muscles began to relax as he worked them loose.

She moaned quietly as another knot gave way. "You ever consider offering your services at Diosa?" Her voice was drowsy. "You could make a fortune with those hands."

He lightly smacked her. "Not on your life."

She laughed quietly, turning her head further so she could look at him over her shoulder. "Why're you so nice to me?"

He sighed, sitting back on his heels. "Christ, woman, why's everything got to be a tit for tat with you? Can't you just enjoy it if something good happens?"

"No." She rolled over and sat up, clutching the pillow to her chest. "'Cause in my experience, people being nice want something from you."

He tilted his head. "That's a cynical way to see the world."

"What is that *you* want, Filip?"

Us. The answer popped into Chibs' brain unbidden and unexpected, shocking the shite out of him with its clarity. Thankfully, he managed to stop himself from blurting out the word. It wasn't the sort of thing to say lightly, and he wanted a chance to think about it before he said anything to her. So far, they hadn't been an *us*. It had never been part of his plans for them. Sure, they'd had great sex, riding with her was fun, and they worked well together—when they weren't butting heads or measuring dicks. But an *us*...? "Want you to let me deal with the scumbag did this," he said instead, hand gently brushing over the healing rash on her leg. "Want you to stop pretending nothing can hurt you."

"Fuck you, Chibs." Jarry reached for the shirt she'd discarded on the bed next to her and pulled it on. "You know who I am, what I do. I told you already, I can't let you fix my shit for me." She scooted into her pants. "And by the way, I don't appreciate you sending your bulldog to talk to my deputies behind my back."

He hopped off the bed. "Club's always kept dealers out of Charming." He didn't bother responding to her jab about Tig chatting up Eglee for intel.

She flung the pillow at him. "Do you even hear yourself? That's *my* fuckin' job, not yours, and not Samcro's. Look—." She held up a hand to forestall any further protest from him. "If you got anything that'll help me put away that douche selling to kids, I'll gladly accept it. But you gotta let *me* handle it. Don't get in my way on this, Filip. I'm warning you."

"See, now, that's a problem." In spite of his efforts, his temper was beginning to get the best of him. He jammed his feet into his boots and scooped his rings from the bedside table. Playtime was over. "Cause that's a promise *I* can't make."

oOo

"That the guy?"

The words were spoken softly in Chibs' ear as Tig crammed himself between the front seats of the van. From the driver's seat, Hap grunted at him to fuckin' stay back, but Tig ignored him. They'd been waiting for hours, since the sun rose, for their target to make an appearance.

"Guess so." Chibs fought the urge to scoot toward the front windshield for a better view of the rusty sedan rolling into the weed-choked driveway across the street from them. Even from here he could see the man who tumbled from behind the wheel matched the description Jarry had given Eglee, down to his dirty green ball cap.

Rat and Montez, successfully hacking into the DMV database overnight, had come up with a name, age and address for the bastard: Marc Hamill, twenty-six, a house in a shitty part of Morada. Bringing Chibs the intel, Rat had sniggered, "Bet his friends call him Luke." When Chibs gave him a puzzled look, Rat had blinked in surprise. "Star Wars, dude."

Not in the mood for jokes, Chibs had grumbled, "Just get the van ready." Jarry would be gunning for the guy, too, and with the amount of time it had taken to find him, they'd have to hurry to pick up Hamill before the cops did.

The neighborhood in Morada where Hamill lived was the kind of 'hood where the pavement was cracked, the paint was peeling, and every third house was boarded up. Hamill's single-story hovel was no different from its neighbors: a leaning porch; grimy windows, one showing a crack someone had fixed up with duct tape; and crumbling sills.

They watched Hamill stumble up the porch and totter inside. For the next five minutes, nothing and no one moved, either inside the house or outside of it. Satisfied Hamill would be alone, Chibs ordered, "Let's go grab the bastard."

Careful not to slam the doors, the Sons jumped from the van, scanning their surroundings. The rest of the street was deserted, no one around to rat them out to the cops. To be on the safe side, they'd left their cuts in the van and were wearing dark sweatshirts with the hoods up to obscure their faces as much as possible. Taking Rat with him, Tig headed to the back of the house to cover the rear, while Chibs and Happy hopped up on to the porch. It creaked under their weight.

Straightforward always worked best, Chibs had learned over the years. He rapped on the door with his gloved fist and inside, someone shouted an acknowledgement, the actual words too muffled to make out. As soon as the door latch clicked and the door started to swing open, Happy plowed into it, using his body weight to force it wider and shove Hamill backward. The prick

whined a protest. Hap turned the gun around in his hand with a quick, experienced movement and clobbered Hamill with the butt.

Chibs followed close on Hap's heels, shutting the door once a final glance confirmed the street remained empty. "Easy bro," he warned Hap, as he saw Hamill wipe some blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. A strong reek of alcohol and sweat hung around the guy, and his pupils were constricted to tiny pinpoints, but even drunk and high, he'd be smart enough to keep his gob shut.

Happy shot Chibs an irritated look while he shoved Hamill against the wall, an arm against his throat to keep Hamill from getting ideas. Chibs ignored it. They'd gone over this; he wanted Hamill to fuckin' *hurt* for what he had done to Jarry and was doing to their town. He also wanted minimal damage visible on the bastard. No reason to give a lawyer ammunition to use a police brutality defense after Samcro handed Hamill over to Jarry. Happy didn't like the plan—he was eager to take care of business himself—and Chibs wasn't too pleased with it either, but it was the best compromise he'd been able to come up with between Jarry's desire to be a real cop and his own need for payback and intel. So his hot-blooded SAA would have to deal.

Leaving Hap to hogtie Hamill, Chibs hurried through the house, casting quick glances into the rooms he passed to confirm they were alone. He met Tig and Rat, who'd come barging in through the back door as soon as they heard the commotion at the front. Together, they searched the house thoroughly from top to bottom, finding empty rooms littered with trash and mouse droppings and dirty mattresses. The whole place stank of mold and unwashed clothes.

"Bingo!" Tig had discovered Hamill's stash in a cardboard shoe box in a closet in one of the rooms. He carried it triumphantly into the front room. Hamill yammered a new protest on seeing it, but his complaints were muffled by the gag Hap had shoved into his mouth, and they all ignored him. "What you wanna do with it?" Tig lifted the lid and tilted the box to show Chibs the collection of baggies.

"Leave it." Jarry was gonna need the drugs for evidence, and it'd be better if she discovered them at Hamill's house. Preserving the chain of evidence, or some such legal shite. He turned toward Hamill. "Anyone else live here?" They hadn't seen any signs of other people, but better to be safe than sorry.

When Hamill didn't answer immediately, Happy growled deep in his throat. His eyes flicking to Hap and then back to Chibs, Hamill shook his head.

"Good boy." Chibs patted Hamill's cheek, taking relish in the way the bastard flinched at his touch. Prick'd be in for a world of hurt soon enough. "Let's get this shithead the hell outta here."

A few minutes later, they'd bundled Hamill into the back of the van and dumped him on the floor. Tig yanked a bag over the guy's head—no use in letting him see where they were taking him, considering they were planning to let him live—and Happy put the van in gear. Chibs dragged his hood back from his face, breathing deeply and smoothing his hair as Hap drove them away.

So far, so good.

oOo

They took Hamill to Oswald's old barn. The place had been abandoned since they'd gotten out of guns, and weeds had sprung up all over the access track. Tig pulled the large double doors open, hinges squeaking. Inside, cobwebs hung in corners and dust motes danced in the sunbeams that pierced a dozen cracks in the planked walls. Tig sneezed. "Fuckin' dust, man."

Chibs order Rat to take the empty van back to the garage. The fewer Sons absent from Redwood Auto, the less suspicion they'd raise, and he could handle Hamill just fine with Tig and Happy for company. And they wouldn't need the van until they were ready to transport Hamill again; they'd parked their bikes behind the barn before they headed to Morada.

Chibs waited outside the barn, smoking a cigarette and squinting into the noon sun, while Happy and Tig strung Hamill up from one of the rafters. This place had seen a lot of bloodshed, and it seemed a fitting location to take the guy for a private 'chat' before handing him to Jarry.

"We're ready, brother," Tig called. Chibs dropped his smoke in the dirt and ground it out under his boot. Happy removed Hamill's gag as he walked inside and word vomit spewed from the bastard's mouth the moment Hap pulled the cloth away. "What do you guys want? Shit, I got no beef with the Sons. What'd I do, huh? What'd I do? You want money? I got money at the house. Or you wanna piece of my pie? I can cut you in for a percentage. Let's talk, a'right? We can—"

At a gesture from Chibs, Happy landed a hard right straight to Hamill's solar plexus. All the air whooshed out of him in a single gust, and he hung limply, gaping like a fish on land, eyes bugged out. For an instant, Chibs was afraid the impact had stopped his heart. Would suck if they killed him by accident. Then Hamill wheezed in a fresh breath. Good, not dead yet.

"You keep yer gob shut. Ye don't speak unless it's to answer questions. Understood?"

Hamill nodded, chugging in air laboriously.

"Good." Chibs moved in front of Hamill, his wrists crossed behind his back. He had to look up slightly, with the way Hamill was hanging by his arms, his toes barely scraping the ground. "First of all, what were you doing at the Point, two days ago?"

"Nothing! I was never at the Point—Okay, okay!"

Chibs had signaled to Happy at the first lie, and Hap had taken another step forward in response, hands curled into fists, his eyes dark. Not being allowed to do any real damage would cramp his style, but Hamill proving to be a dirtbag *and* a pussy meant Happy wasn't even gonna get to do that much: at a mere glare from Happy, Hamill had folded like a cheap suit. Chibs hoped he'd keep it up; it'd make things easier and faster for all of them.

"Diller Point?" Chibs reminded Hamill, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah, yeah. I was just minding my own business, you know. Enjoying the view and shit."

Chibs didn't bother to call Hamill out on his new lies. He already knew what had happened. These questions were just to mellow the bastard up. "And after?"

"After?" Hamill seemed to have recovered his nerve a little, perhaps thinking Chibs had believed his story so far. "I went home—ooh!" He laughed. The scumbag fuckin' *laughed*. "You wanna hear how that fuckin' bitch tried to tail me? I took care of that cunt—."

Before the last word had left Hamill's mouth, Chibs had backhanded him, his rings gouging Hamill's cheek and splitting his lip. Blood streamed down Hamill's chin. "Ow ow ow," he blubbered. "What you do that for?"

Again, Chibs hauled back, but Tig grabbed his fist before he could lay another on Hamill. "Easy, prez. No damage, remember?"

Chibs let his arm fall, taking a deep breath. "That *cunt* happens to be a friend," he spat at Hamill. The little shite paled, evidently finally understanding how much trouble he was in.

"Shit, dude. I didn't know—."

Not wanting to hear Hamill's excuses and not trusting his own self-control, Chibs stalked out of the dark barn into the bright sunlight outside. He was shaking and there was a red haze before his eyes. If he had to listen to another word comin' out of that filthy weasel's mouth, he was gonna strangle him with his own bare hands. Goddamn arsehole coulda *killed* her.

A few minutes later, Tig called him in. "Need to hear this, man."

Gathering the shreds of his restraint, Chibs walked back into the shadowy barn. His eyes took a minute to adjust and then he saw Hamill was hanging limply in his chains, drool on his chin and the tears on his cheeks mingling with the drying blood from the cuts Chibs' rings had made. Other than those gouges, he hadn't a mark on him that Chibs could see. He was impressed with Hap's skill.

Hap poked Hamill in the ribs with a hard finger. "It was T-Tully," Hamill whimpered, shaking.

"Tully?" Chibs repeated. "He tell you to sell to fuckin' high school kids in Charming? Mother of Christ."

Leaving it to Happy to gag Hamill again, Chibs and Tig walked out of the barn together and waited for Hap to join them. Once the SAA came stalking out, wiping his hands on a bandana, Tig said, his voice low and incredulous, "AB are expanding into Charming? That's bad, brothers. That's very bad."

"Gonna kill the alliances." Happy cracked his knuckles, anticipating the war sure to follow.

"If it's true," Chibs cautioned. He was having a hard time wrapping his mind around what Hamill had told them. With the peace Jax had wrought, all parties had been enjoying a profitable and peaceful period. It was unlikely the Brotherhood would risk all that by telling a prick like Hamill to start dealing in Charming. But if what he'd said was true—

But Tully's second, Otis, had seemed a standup kinda guy. For a Nazi pig, anyway. Chibs needed better proof before they did anything than just Hamill's word. He reached for his phone, planning to place a call, and then paused with the cell half out of his cut. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have over the phone, prepay or no. He wanted to look Otis in the eye when confronting him with Hamill's accusations. He shoved his phone away and nodded at Tig. "Call Otis. Set up a meet. One hour." It'd take them that long to get to Stockton from the barn. "Just you and me, Tiggy. Hap, you stay here and keep an eye on that weasel in there."

Both Tig and Happy opened their mouths to object, and Chibs rubbed his hands over his face wearily. He was getting too old for this kind of shite.

"I don't wanna go in full-on. Not on that wee shite's say-so alone. Show of force could make things worse. And I need you—," Chibs caught Hap's gaze and held it, "—here to get answers if any other questions come up."

Happy grumbled something under his breath as he went back into the barn. Tig snapped open his phone, regarding Chibs. "You sure about this, bro?"

Chibs huffed a laugh. He wasn't sure about anything these days. "Yeah."

"A'right." Tig nodded and started dialing Otis' number.

oOo

Not long after noon, Tig and Chibs were pulling up in front of the farm house, several miles outside of Stockton, that served as the Aryan Brotherhood's headquarters. Otis was waiting for them on the shaded porch, two of his lieutenants flanking him. Tig kicked the stand on his bike and took off his sunglasses, slipping them through a button hole of his cut. "Don't like this, brother." With a single narrow-eyed sweep he took in the three men and their surroundings.

"Easy, Tigger." Chibs pulled off his own gloves, also giving the place a careful once-over while trying not to be obvious about it. They were both aware, after they'd used the same illusion to take out Moses Cartwright and the rest of Marks' hit squad, how easy it was to hide an army of footsoldiers and still maintain the appearance of a peaceful countryside house languishing under the sun. If the Brotherhood was gunning for Samcro, he and Tig were already fucked, and his last thought before he died would be deeply regretting not bringing the troops. But if Hamill had lied to them, rolling up seven-deep would've sent a signal to the AB that Samcro distrusted them and that would've damaged the relationship. Chibs sighed as he slapped his gloves down on the tank and hung his helmet on the handle bars. This king stuff was making his head hurt.

A few minutes later, he and Tig—still whole and breathing—were sitting in lawn chairs behind the house with Otis and his second-in-command, Lane. The third Aryan had stayed out front, presumably to watch the road. They had beers in their hands, looking for all the world like friendly neighbors shooting the shit on a lazy afternoon. All that was missing was a fuckin' barbecue.

"So, boys, what's this about?" Otis finally broached the purpose of their visit after a few minutes of meaningless pleasantries. If he was up to no good, he was sure hiding it well. "It sounded urgent."

"Got some disturbing intel." Chibs picked at a loose corner of his bottle's label. He hadn't touched the contents, wanting to keep a clear head, something he didn't think was lost on Otis.

"Came to ask if it's valid," Tig added.

"What kinda intel?" Otis sat forward, grinding his beer bottle into the dirt next to

his chair to make sure it stayed upright.

He genuinely didn't seem to have a clue, so Chibs decided to tackle the matter straight-on. "AB dealing in Charming. On Tully's orders." Jax or Clay would've figured out a more circumspect way to bring it up, but that had never been Chibs' style.

"Tully?" His jaw dropping, Otis pulled up straight. "No way, man. He knows better than to try that. We all do. Who the fuck told you that bunk?"

"Wee shite named Hamill."

"Sonofabitch." Otis brayed a harsh laugh. "That stupid tweaker? Wouldn't put stock in a word he says."

Otis hadn't flat out denied he knew Hamill, Chibs noted. "He's been seen dealing inside our borders." Not strictly true, but like the old saying said: if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck.... And Hamill had definitely been quacking.

"Shit." Otis rubbed a palm over his buzz cut. "Listen, man, I'm telling you straight up: that fucker is not operating on any orders from us."

"We found a large stash of H at his place," Tig pointed out. They had no proof the heroin came from the AB, of course, but it was a pretty good guess, considering Otis hadn't denied knowing Hamill.

"He's a, uh, customer," Lane admitted, after exchanging a glance with his boss. "Must've thought to make a few extra bucks playing middle man."

Chibs dipped his head in acceptance of the answer. He was inclined to believe Otis and Lane were telling the truth. A lone pup thinking he had what it took? That made far more sense than the AB trying to muscle into Charming, considering their heroin operation would be bringin' them a lot of green these days. Why would they risk all that, and the peace Jax had made, for a wee little town like Charming? He was glad for it, too. Last thing Samcro needed was another war.

"Where's Hamill now?" Otis wanted to know. He seemed to have forgotten his beer.

"Barn near Charming." Tig lit up a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke. "Hap's with him."

Lane snickered. "That the scary dude?"

"Hey," Tig objected, puffing out his chest and sneering around the butt of his smoke, "Hap ain't the scary one." They all laughed, and the earlier tension flooded away.

Otis finally remembered his beer. He picked up the bottle and took a long pull. "What's gonna be your play?" His expression grew serious again.

Chibs took a slug from his own beer. He had his answers; it was safe enough now to have a drink. *Don't wanna look unfriendly.* "Charming sheriffs are on to him, too. So we'll put the fear o' God in him and turn him over to the cops."

"What?" Otis started so violently that some beer sloshed out of his bottle. "What the hell would you do that for?" He shook his hand to dry it, sending droplets flying. "Samcro on the fuckin' pigs' payroll now?"

"Jaysus. Never." Chibs was firm. Wouldn't do to let that kind of gossip started. "Local el-tee, Jarry. Got a personal beef with Hamill. Reckon we should throw her a bone. Good for our relationship."

"Is that what you call it in Scotland?" Lane cackled. "Gotta say, you biker boys sure know how to pick 'em. Gash's gotta be a fuckin' wildcat in the sack for a Son to be bonin' Five-oh."

"Shut your filthy mouth, you goddamn nazi bastard." Without thinking, Chibs was up out of his chair, shoulders hunched, hands balled into fists. "You don't fuckin' get to talk about her like that."

Lane jumped to his feet, too, his right hand slipping behind his back. From the corner of his eye, Chibs saw Tig go for his gun as well. Goddammit. He took a deep breath and then another, before lowering himself back into the lawn chair by sheer force of will. "Ain't none of your goddamn business, anyway," he managed through gritted teeth. In all honesty, he shoulda seen this coming. He and Jarry weren't shouting from the rooftops they were fucking, but they hadn't kept it a secret, either. He sucked in another breath, forcing his fists open. Beating up the AB's second-in-command, no matter how satisfying, would bring more trouble than it was worth.

"You're right," Otis spoke soothingly, giving Lane a warning look. "Ain't our concern." Lane plopped himself into his own chair, moving his hand out into the open. "But Hamill *is* our concern," Otis went on, while the tension in the air faded. "And I can't allow the cops to talk to him."

"Why not?" Tig asked. "What's he got on you?"

Otis puffed out his cheeks, gazing across the fields toward the hills. "Hamill got kicked out for using the product. Junkies are a liability."

Tig and Chibs both nodded. *Clean up or get out* was the Sons' standing order of business for anyone caught using shit stronger than weed or whiskey.

"He was in deep, though, before he fell off the wagon," Lane admitted. "Could blow a serious whistle on our operation."

"And you let him walk?" Tig's tone betrayed his disbelief, mixed with a hint of contempt.

"He was using heavily. Reckoned he'd OD soon. Didn't seem worth the trouble or expense to get rid of him." Otis shrugged. "That moment of clemency's come back to bite me in the ass, huh?"

"Yeah, no shit." Tig scrubbed his fingers through his hair, exchanging a glance with Chibs.

"Puts us in a pretty pickle," Chibs observed. He was beginning to wish he'd never heard of Marc Hamill.

"I realize that. Sorry." Otis thought for a minute. "Shit. I'd deal with the fucker ourselves, except—" he held out his hands, "we're kinda spread thin at the moment. Got a bunch of guys in lock-up over a dumb scrap the other day. Should be out in a couple days—."

"This can't wait that long," Chibs interrupted. "Jarry's looking for the prick. And she's smart, too." He scowled at Lane, daring him to say anything. Lane kept his mouth shut.

Otis sighed heavily. "Guess I'm gonna be asking you boys for a favor. A big one."

"You want us to handle it?" Tig leaned forward, sounding eager.

"Can you?"

Tig looked at Chibs, asking silently for his decision. Chibs thought it over. Dammit, wasn't what he'd planned, and he'd kinda promised Jarry to keep this sort of shit out of Charming. But if they could get rid of Hamill without any risk of it blowing back on the club, it'd put the AB deep in Samcro's debt. That might come in handy in the future. Jarry'd be suspicious if Hamill disappeared without a trace, of course, but he could handle her.

Tig muttered, "Hap won't mind."

A wry laugh escaped Chibs. He'd have thought those ten days dealing with the Irish would've slaked Hap's thirst for blood for a while but the way he'd taken to

working on Hamill.... Tig was right: Happy would relish the opportunity to do more mayhem.

"A'right," he told Otis. "We'll take care of it. You'll owe us one, though."

"Absolutely." Otis got to his feet. "Thank you, brothers."

Chibs tried not to let on that his skin was crawling at being called a brother by these nazis as he shook hands with Otis and Lane. He fished out the prepay while he and Tig walked to their bikes. "I'll call Hap. Put him on task. Get this shite over and done with."

o0o

Jarry drummed her fingers against the steering wheel of the unmarked squad car. What the hell was taking Carreira and Martinez so long?

Eglee, sitting next to her, had picked up on her boss' mood and hadn't attempted to make small talk while they watched the small, rundown house a dozen yards down the road and across from where the two of them had been parked since they'd pulled up an hour ago. She'd simply sat quietly and patiently while Jarry fretted.

Jarry snuck a glance at her from the corner of her eye without actually taking her gaze from the house. Eglee had returned from medical leave month and a half ago, quickly taking on extra tasks until she was now back on full active duty. She was a good cop and she'd make a good lieutenant some day: smart, levelheaded, compassionate—and hard when she needed to be. She hadn't told Tig shit, despite his poking. And she knew the quadrant inside and out.

Catching herself fidgeting, Jarry made herself sit still. She should've left this particular job to her deputies to handle; a lieutenant had more important things to do than sit outside a scumbag's house waiting for search warrants to turn up. But this was personal, and she wanted this asshole badly.

At least Hamill hadn't left the house this morning: his car was in the driveway. She planned to have that damned sedan impounded as well, and scanned top to bottom by a CSU team from Lodi, soon as Carreira came over with the warrant. She'd bet a month's pay they'd find traces of red paint on its body that matched her Honda's.

She gritted her teeth, trying to control her anger. Damned scumbag had made her wreck her precious bike just weeks after she'd gotten it transported to Charming.

"There's Carreira." Eglee's warning brought Jarry out of her quiet fuming and she

bared her teeth in a humorless grin at the sight of the approaching squad car. Time for payback. Schooling her features into a professional mask—now was not the time to let her emotions get the better of her—she climbed from the car. Carreira, who'd parked a couple houses further down so as not to alert Hamill, trotted up with Martinez on his heels, waving the warrant at her. A third squad car rolled up behind them with the Morada reinforcements she'd deployed.

"Got it, el-tee," Carreira announced triumphantly. "Car, house, everything."

"Thanks." Accepting the warrant, Jarry slid it into the back pocket of her uniform and loosened her gun in its holster. "Let's go get that asshole."

The unspoken *finally* hung in the air. It had taken far longer than she would've liked to set everything up. More than twenty-four hours had passed since, based on her description, the system had spewed out a name and address. She'd itched to snatch Hamill from the streets the instant she learned his name, but she'd forced herself to be smart and put together an airtight case. It wouldn't do to give him an early warning they were on to him and allow him the chance to flush his stash down the toilet or take his car through the carwash to get rid of the evidence of the crash. Although, she chuckled wryly under her breath, as she hurried up the drive, from the look of the vehicle, a carwash was an alien concept to Hamill.

Sending Carreira and the other two deputies around back, Jarry moved up the porch with Eglee and Martinez, carrying a handheld entry ram, in tow. Jarry pounded on the door. "Charming sheriffs! Open up."

The house remained quiet. Nothing moved. In the bungalow across the street, a curtain twitched, an older woman with a cigarette dangling from her lips peering out at the commotion. She noticed Jarry watching her and let the curtain fall shut. Jarry knocked on the door again. "We got a warrant. Open up or we'll break the door down."

Again, nobody answered.

"Use the big key," she ordered, stepping aside to give Martinez room to knock the door down. Soon as it cracked, they moved in, guns drawn. But the house was empty. Hamill was nowhere to be found.

"Fuck," Jarry cursed, holstering her gun, while her deputies bustled around to take the house apart. Where the hell could he be? He hadn't seemed the type to go out for a stroll and leave his car in the drive.

"Lieutenant?" Eglee was kneeling inside the front door, pointing at a dark splatter on the cracked linoleum.

"What you got?" Jarry walked over for a closer inspection.

"Blood, I think. I don't think it's very old."

Leaning down, Jarry examined the droplets. "Think you're right. Goddammit." She straightened. Someone had gotten to Hamill before she had. And she knew exactly who they were.

o0o

Finishing up his call to Hap outside the AB farmhouse, Chibs had just stashed the prepay and tugged on his gloves when his registered cell rang. Signaling to Tig to hold up a minute, he fished the phone out, knitting his brows at the unfamiliar number in the display. "Aye?"

"Where are you?"

Jarry. Must've gotten a new phone with a new number after she'd wrecked the old one.

"Why d'you wanta know?" Even though he'd been involved with her for over six months, old habits died hard.

"Need to talk to you."

Something in her clipped tone made him ask, "Everything okay?"

There was a brief pause, a huff of air. "Just tell me where you are."

He scratched at an eyebrow with a gloved finger. Whatever it was she wanted to talk about, seemed like she didn't want to do it over the phone. Sounded urgent, too. "Near Stockton. I can meet you at Charming PD in thirty."

She disconnected without another word. His frown deepening, Chibs stared at his phone. Yeah, she'd hung up; it wasn't a lost signal.

"What's up?" Tig asked, engine idling, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses.

"Dunno." Chibs put the phone away and reached for the handlebars. "Let's go and find out."

They never made it to Charming. Fifteen minutes after they'd left the farm, Chibs spotted a squad car come up fast from behind, its lights flashing and its siren whooping. He exchanged a look with Tig. Despite the shades they were both wearing, they understood each other well enough: even if the highway ahead of them hadn't been empty of traffic, they'd both been living outlaw for too long to

believe for a second that the cops were there for anyone but them. Before Chibs could signal Tig to pull over—they had nothing to hide—a curve in the road revealed the sun glinting off the roof of a second squad car parked across the middle of the road. A third car, an unmarked sedan, completed the road block.

"Jaysus," Chibs muttered under his breath as he took in the show of force. What bee had she gotten in her bonnet this time? Though, deep down, he figured he already knew.

He and Tig rolled to a stop a half dozen yards from the two cars blocking their path. The squad car behind them pulled up sideways, making a quick escape to the rear impossible. Jarry was standing in front of the unmarked car, her arms crossed over her chest and her lips pressed together, her mirrored shades masking her eyes. With a curt gesture, she ordered the two deputies from the squad car—Carreira and Martinez—to approach Chibs and Tig. A quick check over his shoulder told Chibs that, yep, the guys back there were walking up as well. All four deputies had their hands on their guns, though the weapons were still holstered. Chibs rolled his eyes inwardly. What did those numbnuts think he and Tig were gonna do? Get in a shoot-out in the middle of the road while they were smack in the line of the crossfire?

He lifted his sunglasses up on to his forehead. "Whoa, sheriff, what's with the saber rattling?" In an attempt to ease the tension, he held out his arms to confirm he wasn't planning on reaching for a weapon, smirking at Jarry. Tig followed suit, though his jaw was set and Chibs knew that, behind the dark glasses, his eyes would be narrowed to irritated slits. To be fair, Chibs felt as annoyed as Tig looked, suddenly glad he wouldn't be handing over Hamill to her. Damned bint would look a gift horse in the mouth—if the horse came from Samcro.

"Get off your bikes," Carreira ordered. Not wanting to get caught in a situation he and Tig were bound to come up short in, Chibs obeyed. With a growl and a feinted lunge that made the deputies jump back, Tig did the same. The next instant, Chibs was flat on his belly on the ground, his hands being yanked behind his back and cuffs being locked around his wrists.

"Christ, easy!" he shouted, the hold on his temper fraying. He could understand if Jarry was upset because she'd discovered the club had gotten Hamill. But this was goddamn police brutality.

The cops dragged him back to his feet and he shrugged off their grip, tossing his head to shake the hair out of his eyes. He'd lost the shades; Eglee picked them up, folded them, and stashed them in his cut pocket without a word. Not bothering to thank her, Chibs spat out dirt and gave Jarry a hard, challenging stare.

She looked straight at them. "Filip Telford, Alex Trager, you're both under arrest

for the kidnapping and abduction of Marc Hamill from Morada."

"Who?" Chibs asked, miffed enough with her to pretend ignorance. He had the satisfaction of seeing her fingers twitch. Because she could've waited for him to walk into her office under his own steam and asked him to explain. But, no, if she wanted to play cops and robbers, he'd play along. He knew that game, too. Besides, he could hardly admit to the crime within the hearing of five sheriff's deputies.

The deputies shoved Tig into the squad car with Carreira and Martinez, before depositing Chibs into the back of the unmarked car. Eglee crawled behind the wheel, while Jarry took the shotgun. Another minute, and they were on their way to Charming again. "Hey, what about the bikes?" Chibs demanded, taking a look behind them to see their Dynas standing forlornly in the road. The third squad car had moved to the shoulder of the road.

"Impound truck'll pick 'em up," Eglee offered after a minute, when Jarry didn't answer.

"Shit. Better not scratch the paint." Chibs shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position on the narrow bench. The cuffs alone would have made it hard, but they were pinching his wrists; they'd put them on too tightly. Giving up on the attempt to get comfortable, he studied Jarry's profile. From the set of her mouth and the way her pulse was beating in her neck, he reckoned he'd better not voice his gripes about the treatment he'd received just then. She was holding all the cards, and getting her even more pissed wasn't gonna win him any favors.

oOo

Jarry didn't speak a word during the short ride to the sheriff's station. She didn't have him booked, which Chibs took for a good sign, just taken directly to the same interrogation room he'd sat in a month ago. It hadn't changed one bit, down to the scratch in the table's surface. On the way there, he caught a glimpse of Tig being hauled toward lock-up.

"Sorry," Eglee muttered as she guided him into a chair. He'd hoped she'd remove the cuffs, too, but her regret apparently didn't stretch that far.

Eglee left, shutting the door behind her, and silence descended on the small room. Chibs shifted in his seat, hoping to find relief from the pinch of the handcuffs, and eyed the tiny light on the camera in the corner up by the ceiling that was blinking a lazy red, telling him he was being recorded. And, of course, there was no way of knowing who was watching him from behind the one-way mirror. He had to assume someone was, so he tried to adopt an air of unconcern, slouching in the hard-backed chair.

Hours later—it had to be at least a couple, though it was hard to keep track of time—he was still alone and it was growing more and more difficult to pretend he didn't have a care in the world. What was Jarry's deal? He'd been on the receiving end of cops' tricks enough times to understand she was playing a psychological game with him. Usually, this kind of shite didn't faze him. But this time....

This time, it hurt. He'd been sure she was, if not quite a friend, at least friendly to Samcro. And he'd thought they were turning from fuck buddies into... into something else.

Instead, she was treating him as if he were any other low-life sonofabitch. If he'd known she was gonna take it this far and toss him and Tig in lock-up, he would've taken a different tack altogether. Certainly would've handed Hamill over, regardless of the AB's fuck-up. Wasn't Samcro's problem, so let Otis clean up his own goddamn messes. But enough time had passed before they'd reached the roadblock that he was certain Happy had already executed his last order long before Jarry had picked them up. He couldn't give Hamill to Jarry any longer without sacrificing Hap and the club.

He flexed his hands, trying to get the blood flowing. Stupid fool he was, trying to be clever and playing both ends against the middle. What had he been thinking? When had that ever fuckin' worked for Samcro?

And how the hell was he gonna fix this shite he got them into?

His hands were numb and his shoulders were screaming by the time he heard Jarry's voice outside the door, while his throat was parched and he needed to take a piss like a horse. He'd be damned if he'd tell her that though. He couldn't afford to appear weak when she was playing hard-ball.

She walked in a moment later, carrying a manilla folder under her arm. Shutting the door, she observed him silently. She no longer seemed as furious as she'd been at the road block. In fact, she looked weary and a little saddened, and some of Chibs' own irritation faded.

She dropped the file on the table. "Where's Hamill?" she asked quietly.

"Who?" Chibs' gaze flicked toward the camera in the corner.

"Oh, for heaven's—." She broke off with an exasperated huff. Looking straight at the camera, she made a chopping motion. The light died.

"Just you and me, Filip." She took a seat across from him. "Again, where is he?"

He shifted sideways, leaning forward so he could lift his arms and show them to her. "Wanna take these off, first? Before my fuckin' hands fall off?"

"Christ, Scotty." Her eyes had widened—it couldn't be a pretty sight—and she hopped up, fishing out her keys and releasing the cuffs. "Why didn't you say something?"

He grunted. "Am now." With the blood flow restored to his hands, his words quickly morphed into a suppressed groan, his nerves singing. Yeah, the cuffs had been way too tight. Fuckin' Carreira.

As Jarry massaged his hands and wrists, not speaking, Chibs began to hope he could convince her to see reason and get them all out of this mess without too many consequences for all concerned.

Jarry let go of him and walked back to her own side of the table. "You know what this is?" She opened the folder. Chibs was too busy rolling his shoulders and sighing from the sheer pleasure of being able to do so to pay attention immediately, but he quickly straightened in his chair and took a look at where her hand rested on the pages.

Even from upside down, he recognized the Sanwa DA's letterhead and the words *Search and Seizure* in capital letters. Below that, the page was printed margin to margin.

"Search warrants," Jarry confirmed. "For the club van, Scoops, the garage. I can seize the bikes as well. Still waiting for warrants to search your homes. Won't take long."

"Jesus, Althea." The words were out of Chibs' mouth before he could swallow them. He hadn't expected this. Not after the last six months. They'd reached an understanding.... "What the hell are you doing?" He was too stunned to be angry.

"My job." She leaned back in her chair until he raised his gaze from the warrants to meet hers. "I haven't executed any of them—yet." The threat was unmistakable. "I will, if I have to." She straightened, pinning him in place with a look. "I'll ask you one more time, Filip: where is Hamill?"

He kept on staring at her. Even when they were at war with the Chinese, and blood was being spilled, she hadn't come down this hard on the club. So why now? What made this situation so different?

"How'd you manage that?" He tipped his head toward the stack of warrants in an attempt to change the subject and gain some time to consider what his next move should be. What he *wanted* to do was roar at her about why the fuck she

was pissing on everything they'd achieved together, but he had enough presence of mind to know shouting wouldn't get him anywhere—except back in those bloody cuffs.

She huffed a laugh, bitter and without a trace of humor. "Got a witness. Saw a black van with four guys taking Hamill earlier this morning."

"That's impossible," Chibs blurted. They'd been careful; he knew they'd been careful. Wasn't their first time around the block.

Again, Jarry uttered a wry half-laugh. "Never underestimate the curiosity or memory of old spinsters living vicariously."

Chibs grumbled another curse.

"Granted," Jarry went on, "she didn't describe any of the Sons in particular. But combined with a couple additional pieces of, uh, intelligence, it gave me enough probable cause to prepare these." She gestured at the warrants. "And you and I both *know* Samcro took Hamill."

Chibs stroked at his beard, thinking fast. "If you're so damned sure, why haven't you gotten them signed yet?" He nodded at the file.

She cocked her head, studying him as if deciding whether or not to tell him. "Because taking these to a judge would compromise me too. Only reason the club knows Hamill exists is because of me. Because of *us*."

"Shit." He hadn't thought of that. "That'd destroy your career."

"Yes." Again, she sounded more sad than angry. "I'd rather not, but if I let this go... Filip, there's a line I won't cross." She tapped a finger on the table's surface. "And it's right here." She sighed, leaning forward and placing a hand over his sore wrist. "I thought we had an understanding, the two of us: you'd let me do my job and I'd stay out of your way as much as I could."

"I never made that promise." He pulled free of her touch.

"No, you didn't. I suppose it was foolish of me to hope that asking you to keep out of this would be enough."

"Mother of Christ, Althea," He jumped up, slamming his fists on the table. "That prick coulda killed ye! Of course I can't let that go. How can you ask me that?"

She peered up at him, curious but not in the least disturbed by his outburst. "Oh my God..." Understanding bloomed in her eyes. "Oh Jesus, Filip, *no*. I'm not your old lady. I don't need a knight in shining armor. I don't need *protecting*."

Chibs plopped back down, opening his mouth to object, but she waved him to silence.

"I'm a cop, Chibs. Have been for twenty years. It's what I do." She was silent for a beat. "No, it's what I *am*. Ever since that angry twenty-one year old woke up in a hospital bed with a bullet hole in her side—," she touched her flank where the scar lay hidden under her shirt; Chibs didn't think she was aware of doing so. "—and I realized I'd nearly died over some very dumb, very meaningless crap. Who the fuck gets shot over Easter dinner, anyway? So I decided there and then that if I was gonna die bloody, I wanted it to be for a good reason. And I worked my ass off to get where I am today. My methods may be unconventional," she chuckled ruefully, "but I get results. Scumbags in jail; the streets a little safer. This —," she flicked a hand between them, "—you and me? I should've never let it go this far. It was wrong—we're wrong, and deep down you know it, too." She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "The sheriff and the outlaw. Sounds like a bad western."

"Don' hafta be." He examined his hands. The color was returning to normal, though his wrists would be bruised for a while. "You were plenty happy using the club to get that carjacking crew. And that tweaker's off the street now. Why not take that as a win and let it go?"

"Because it's no longer working, that's why. Maybe it never did, I don't know. All I know is that this—you, me—it's taking everything that I am." Her voice shook. "God, Filip, I barely recognize myself in the mirror these days."

"Sweet Jesus." Chibs raised his head. "What do you want me to say?"

"Just tell me where Hamill is."

He eyed her for a long minute, considering. Hamill was dead, and he wasn't sure how she'd take that news. But if he refused to give her something.... She wasn't uttering idle threats: she would execute those warrants, regardless of the consequences to herself, and use them to take down the whole club, even if she couldn't tie them to Hamill's death directly. She'd dig and dig, until she found something she could use. And the garage was barely getting by, scrambling to gain a footing as a respectable business. Having the whole place turned upside down, cops crawling all over everything, Sons being hauled off to prison... that'd kill any chance of creating a legit business for sure.

More importantly, she had a point. She'd asked him to leave this case to her, and he'd ignored her. For what he reckoned were good reasons, but clearly she didn't see it the same way he did.

Chibs knew he might not be the most empathetic man, with an estranged wife

and daughter and a failed marriage, but he did understand that they were balanced on a knife edge. If he wanted a shot at bringing her over to his side, he'd have to be honest. Full disclosure. Question was: did he want to?

Mother of God, the things she could do his club if he told her everything.... On the other hand, she already could destroy them. His only play now was to trust her, to throw himself and Samcro on her mercy, and pray the feelings he had for her were mirrored in hers for him.

He swallowed. "I'll take ye to him."

oOo

Jarry was surprised at Chibs' apparent change of heart, but she didn't want to question it and give him a chance to change his mind again. "Tell me where to find him and I'll send someone to get him."

"No." His response to her offer was quiet but firm. "I'll have to take you to him, Althea."

She studied him for a long moment, recognizing from the set of his shoulders he wasn't going to budge. She'd bent him as far as she could; any further, and he'd break—and Sons never did.

After she'd discovered Hamill was missing, she'd thought Chibs had ignored her request to let her handle it because he was too stubborn to give her an inch, the macho biker culture not allowing him to back down. The kidnapping was simply another step in their intricate dance to determine who was best suited to protect Charming. She'd been offended both personally and professionally: she was perfectly capable of dealing with wannabe thugs like Hamill. She'd put together a good case, which had been helped along by the drugs they'd discovered at Hamill's house and the scrapes of paint on his car that she fully expected the CSU team to confirm matched her bike. Case closed, easy peasy.

But she'd gotten it all wrong. Chibs hadn't been thinking about who controlled the town or who had the biggest dick. It had been far more personal than that. And she hadn't seen that coming—at all. Should've, maybe. After all, she did know the cavemen-like way outlaw societies operated with regards to their women. It had simply never crossed her mind he'd start thinking of her like that.

She shook herself. She'd have to figure the rest out later. For now, the priority was getting her hands on Hamill, slamming the prick's ass in jail and figuring out how to extract them all from this SNAFU. "Alright. I'll drive."

"No." Another determined single-syllable refusal. "I'll ride. You got my bike here, yeah?"

Jarry tried not to roll her eyes too obviously. Yep: cavemen. "Think that's a good idea?" She nodded at his still swollen hands, ignoring the pang of guilt she felt and making a mental note to have a talk with her deputies about proper procedure. Sure, she'd wanted Chibs kept cuffed, knowing it'd be uncomfortable and would press home the point that she was in charge. But she hadn't wanted to *torture* him. That shit could be dangerous; people were known to have suffered nerve damage from too-tight cuffs.

Chibs flexed his fingers experimentally. "I can ride," he grunted, as if her merely asking the question was an insult. Probably was, too. She reckoned he'd have to be dead before admitting he couldn't ride.

"Okay, let's go."

"Tig?" he asked.

It was her turn to shake her head. "No. I like him right where he is."

Chibs didn't try to change her mind. "Aye." However, he stopped her when she open the door and called to Eglee and Martinez to come along. "No. You and me."

She scanned his features. She'd put the thumbscrews on pretty tightly. Likely hurt his macho pride, too. But she didn't believe he'd do something as monumentally dumb as making her 'go away'.

He sighed, smiling faintly. "No tricks, promise."

oOo

Having gotten his bike released from the impound, Jarry followed Chibs for several miles out of Charming before he turned off the main road and started down a narrow track leading deeper into the forest. From the looks of it, the road hadn't seen a lot of traffic lately, and she was beginning to have second thoughts about the wisdom of letting an outlaw biker lure her into the woods after sunset and alone.

After a mile or so, she made out the silhouette of a building. An old barn, its walls and roof outlined against the starry sky. Chibs swung round in front of it and backed his bike into a spot next to the Harley already parked there. The beam of his headlamp washed over Happy, walking out of the forest with a flashlight in one hand and carrying something over his shoulder. A shovel?

Jarry drew her squad car to a halt at the exact instant Happy caught sight of her. In spite of the distance and gloom under the trees, she saw the flash of confusion

on his face, quickly replaced by a hard anger. He dropped the shovel and, in the same smooth movement, brought up a gun he must've grabbed from the belt at his back and aimed it at her.

Acting on instinct ingrained over the years, she shoved open her door and dropped to her haunches behind it. Her own service weapon was out, muzzle resting in the gap between door and car frame, pointing in Happy's direction. "Drop your weapon," she shouted.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, no!" That was Chibs, swinging from his bike and tossing his helmet away from him without caring where it landed. Keeping his back to her, he sprinted toward Happy. Goddammit! Asshole was blocking her line of fire.

And, she understood a second later, preventing Happy from taking a shot at her.

"Hap, brother, put the gun down. It's a'right."

Leaning sideways for a careful peek around the door, and around Chibs, she saw Happy was still holding the gun, his attention on Chibs now.

"What the fuck is this?" Happy's gravelly voice was laced with the fury she'd seen in his face, but she also detected hurt and confusion. A dangerous combination. "You been ratting to this bitch?"

"Christ, Hap. No. It ain't what ye think, bro. Gotta hear me out."

Happy lowered his gun, slowly, as if uncertain, and Chibs walked toward him. He began talking to Happy, the distance too great for Jarry to overhear what he was saying, with her ears still buzzing from the adrenaline racing through her bloodstream.

After a moment, she holstered her gun and leaned over, hands on her knees, taking a few deep breaths.

Regaining her equilibrium, and checking Happy still had his gun lowered, she strode toward the two men, her right hand involuntarily twitching near her own gun. "Holy crap, Scotty, what the fuck was that?"

"Oh, just a wee misunderstanding." Chibs had the gall to sound amused and she fired him a sharp look. *Not funny, Scotty.* He caught the look. "You okay, luv?"

She didn't see fit to give him an answer to that. "Hamill?"

He sighed. "Aye. Hap?"

Happy stared at Chibs for a long moment, and Jarry had the strong impression something was communicated silently that she was no part of. Whatever message they exchanged, the result was that, after a minute, Happy shrugged slightly and disappeared among the trees. Grabbing her own flashlight from her belt, Jarry hurried after him, while Chibs brought up the rear.

Happy didn't take them far. He stopped a hundred yards into the undergrowth, directed his flashlight toward a spot on the ground. The earth had recently been disturbed, fresh clods visible in the flashlight's glow. The whole spot measured roughly six by three feet.

Despite her years of experience, it took Jarry several seconds to make sense of what she was looking at. "Jesus Chr—Are you fucking *serious*?" She whirled around to face Chibs, who was standing a few feet off, watching her. She couldn't believe the asshole had killed Hamill. Over her? "A fucking grave? You brought me to his fucking grave?" Fumbling with the flashlight, her anger making her hands shake, she scrabbled for her radio with the other hand, not stopping to think about what she was doing.

From somewhere behind, Happy's wry comment reached her. "Bad fuckin' plan, bro."

Chibs ignored him. Taking two large strides forward, he grabbed Jarry, stopping her from getting her radio out of its pocket and holding her firmly enough he was gonna leave bruises on her arms. "Althea, don't call it in. Listen to me. This isn't how I wanted this to go, but—. Please. Let me explain."

It was his plea that did her in. She let go of the radio and lifted her hand enough to show it was empty. "I'm listening. Better make it good, though."

Chibs drew a breath, visibly collecting his thoughts before he started. His voice was low and his accent heavy as he spoke. By the time he was finished with telling her everything that had gone down, she felt empty, drained, all the fight gone out of her. "Good God, Filip. What am I supposed to do with all this?"

He held her gaze. "I don't know. I guess you do what you gotta do."

Jesus. She looked at the dark trees. What he'd told her, what he'd given her, it was any cop's wet dream. With this, plus what she already had, she could take down SAMCRO in its entirety. Finish what many before her had tried and failed to do. Possibly even topple the local Aryan Brotherhood, too, if she played her cards right. Her career would be set for life; she'd be able to pick any position she wanted, anywhere in the state. Nobody would give a damn how she'd come by the evidence or that it had been her own indiscretions that had set events in motion in the first place.

She redirected her focus back to Chibs. "Why?" Her voice was scratchy.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again without speaking, shrugging instead. His gaze never left hers as he gave a second, slighter shrug. She understood, kinda. It was too big for words. She'd once dared him to prove that he felt something for her, and he had. But this? This was so much bigger. Because what he felt now was so much bigger?

She dragged her fingers through her hair, gazing down at the grave again. How the hell had this become her life?

"I gotta go." She wrung the words out from a too tight throat. Turning, she started back through the woods, toward her car. Behind her, Happy asked, "We okay here?"

"I don't know, brother." Chibs had never sounded more beaten to her. "I don't know."

oOo

Early the next morning, the guys filed into the chapel at Scoops and took their seats. Chibs, sitting in the president's chair at the head of the table and staring at the pictures on the wall, didn't acknowledge them. He only turned his attention away from the pictures when Quinn spoke up.

"Jesus, boss. Did you sleep at all?"

Chibs' neck cracked as he raised his head and looked around. No, he hadn't slept. He'd gone straight to the clubhouse after leaving Hap to clean up the last of the evidence from the barn, needing to think. Though his thinking hadn't gotten him any further in any direction; he still saw no way out of the mess he'd dragged them into.

Tig's empty chair to his left was a silent accusation of how badly he'd fucked up. He'd tried to do right: by Jackie; by his brothers. Instead, he'd likely blown the whole thing and brought about the annihilation of his club. And Jax had warned him to watch his position with Jarry—*Not too close, brother*—but he hadn't listened, had he?

He rubbed his jaw, feeling his palm rasp over day-old stubble. "I'm sorry, lads." His voice was scratchy. The expressions in the four pairs of eyes fixed on him ranged from curious to concerned. Happy was the only one not looking at him, his gaze fixed on the opposite wall and his expression blank, although a muscle was twitching in his jaw. He'd evidently not let on he had any idea what was going on, leaving it to Chibs to drag the coals out of the fire. Rightly so; Chibs had been the one to build the damn thing and then pour gasoline on to it, after

all. Chibs cleared his throat. "I may have bollocksed it all up."

His eye was drawn once again to the photos on the wall. Jax had always been the strategist: a chess player who could think a dozen moves ahead and make sure all the pieces on the board did what he wanted. Chibs didn't have that talent. All he had was honesty—or brutal violence. Until he heard again from Jarry, he couldn't dare hope the first had bought him any credit at all, and he didn't want to resort to the latter for a solution. The club had seen enough bloodshed already.

Was he gonna be the president who finally brought Samcro down? After they'd survived JT's murder, Clay's betrayal, and Jax's misdirected vengeance? And all because he had wanted to be the kind of man for Jarry he'd failed to be for Fi and Kerriane? Provider, protector.... He scoffed inwardly. Christ, he was a fool. If there was ever a woman didn't need his help....

"What're you talking about?" T.O. was first to speak, when Chibs remained silent for too long. "What happened? All we know is you and Tig got picked up." T.O. hadn't been in the thick of things with the Chinese; he'd only seen it go down from the fringes. He had no idea how bad things could get.

"I—."

From the store below came the sounds of a door slamming, followed by heavy boots on the stairs. Chibs closed his eyes. Was Jarry making her move?

"Starting without me, boys?"

Chibs' eyes flew open again, to see a grinning Tig looming in the doorway. With a cheer of welcome, the rest of the guys jumped up to man-hug him and slap his shoulders, everyone beaming and shouting rude comments. Chibs whistled out a breath, only now realizing he'd heard just a single pair of feet and not the full SWAT team he had been expecting.

He turned in his seat, not able to resist smiling a little, and took a closer look at his VP. Tig looked slightly the worse for the wear after a night in a holding cell—cheeks shaded with stubble, clothes rumpled, his hair in more disarray than usual—but otherwise surprisingly cheerful.

He passed behind Chibs on his way to his own chair. "She let you go?" Chibs asked, craning his neck. He could still hardly believe Tig was free.

"Yeah." Tig slipped into place. "Eglee did. Showed up this morning to let me out. Said all charges were dropped."

"Sweet Jesus." Chibs shoved his chair back from the table and, remaining seated,

bent forward, hands still curled around the table's edge and arms stretched out. Mother of Christ, she'd come through; she'd buried the case. Looked like they were in the clear after all.

The realization stole his breath away and left him dizzy with relief. Maybe he hadn't fucked up as badly as he'd thought. He took several deep breaths, his gaze trained on his knees but not really seeing anything.

"Uh, anyone care to fill the rest of us in?" Montez piped up from his seat at the far end. "We're kinda dying to know here."

A guffaw of uncomfortable laughter rose at his words. With Montez' quip having eased the tension, Chibs sat up straight again, trying to calm his hammering heart. "Give us a minute, lads," he nodded to indicate himself and Tig, "and I'll explain everything." He needed to bring Tig up to speed and compare notes before he said more.

The rest of them exchanged uncertain glances and Quinn hesitated longest before he too got to his feet with the rest.

"Not you, Hap." Chibs waved Hap back into his chair. Happy grimaced but sat back down as the others filed out. Rat, the last one out, shot an uneasy look across his shoulder before he shut the door.

Chibs waited until their footsteps in the stairwell had faded away. "Tig?"

Tig didn't have much more to add: he'd been left alone overnight to stew, unable to find out anything, until Eglee had set him free this morning. When he'd asked about Chibs, she'd told him he'd been released the night before. He'd been too glad to leave the sheriff's station behind and get his bike from the pound to bother making a stink over the unfair treatment.

Having finished his story, Tig stared at Chibs, his eyes narrowed. "How the hell did you work it, bro?"

Hap made a noise. Chibs ignored him, stroking his chin, too exhausted to fully trust his high stakes gamble had paid off. He could feel every one of his nearly fifty years in his bones. "You see her? Jarry?" He didn't want to ask, but he needed to know where they stood with her.

"Nah, man. Only saw Eglee."

They were silent for a minute, until Tig spoke again, warily. "What *did* you do?"

Casting a glance at Happy, whose expression remained neutral, Chibs told Tig everything, from the second he and Tig had been separated until the moment

Jarry had gotten in her squad car and driven away from the barn.

"Jesus Christ." Tig's curse was no more than a whisper. "Bitches, man." He mulled it over. "You think we're really in the clear? What if it's a trick?"

Chibs raised his shoulders. "Dunno." He looked at Happy. "Sorry I put that on ye, brother." Even if things with Jarry turned out the way he prayed, he still had some serious fence-mending to do with Hap.

Happy waved it off. "Don' matter." He dipped a hand into his cut and came out with a folded sheet of paper. "Something I wanna tell ya." He handed the piece of paper over to Chibs.

Chibs unfolded it. "What's this, then?" Without his reading glasses, he couldn't see what it said.

"Transfer letter. Tacoma. Talked to Lee. Said he could use me. Want the club to vote on it asap."

Mother of Jesus. "Hap—."

"Shit, Hap, you gonna leave us?" Tig jumped up from his seat. "Now? We got a good thing going, brother. We need you, too."

Happy cocked his head, looking up at Tig with dark, hooded eyes. "Ain't my scene no more."

Chibs pinched the bridge of his nose, overwhelmed by sudden sadness. They were losing everyone; with Hap in Tacoma, he and Tig would be the last ones left of the old club, the Samcro who'd run Charming together for years. But he wasn't gonna fight Hap on this. If Happy wanted out, Chibs would let him go. Things were heating up again, up north, with the Russians, and Lee was gonna need a guy like Hap. And Chibs had long since known his SAA wasn't satisfied with the direction they were taking Samcro. And after last night....

He wasn't sure he could trust his own judgement any longer. How could he ask Hap to trust him?

"We can vote it later today." He slipped the letter inside his cut. "That a'right with you?"

"Okay." Happy pushed up from his seat and left the chapel.

Tig lit a cigarette and passed the pack to Chibs. Chibs shook one out and accepted the flame Tig offered. They smoked in silence.

"Guess we gonna need to find a new SAA." Chibs tapped the ash from his cigarette. Tig leaned his head back, releasing a stream of smoke toward the ceiling, before straightening up.

"Maybe you need to find a new VP."

"What?" Chibs whirled toward him, mouth open. He must've heard wrong. Was Tig quitting on him too? "C'mon, bro, you—."

"Whoa!" Tig's mouth twitched and he gestured with the cigarette. "Hold your horses, prez. I ain't leaving. Just thinkin' I make a far better SAA than VP."

"Yeah?" Relieved, Chibs took another pull from his smoke. "What makes you think that?"

Tig raised a shoulder. "We both know I'm better on the right. And with the direction this club is going, you need someone with a cooler head than me on your left. Quinn, I'd say."

Chibs pursed his lips and blew out smoke. Tig had been his unquestioned choice for VP after Jackie had to go. But that had been when he thought he, Hap and Tig would do it all three of them together: get the club back on its feet and onto the legit path Jax had been aiming for.

He let his gaze travel around the chapel. Still had a long way to go, but they'd been on the right track.

"Alright," he conceded. "We'll put that out there same time we deal with Hap's transfer."

"Thanks, bro." Tig ground out his butt and got to his feet, grabbing Chibs by the shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. "Thanks."

And Chibs knew that, no matter how many shitty decisions he'd made lately, this was a good one.

oOo

It was near evening by the time Chibs got a text message from Jarry, a single line that said *We need to talk*. All day, he'd wavered between going to check on her and waiting for her to contact him. To keep from brooding, he'd stayed buried up to his elbows in transmission fluids and greasy car innards at the garage, doing his best to keep his mind from wandering down increasingly alarming tracks.

It was a relief to finally get the text. He answered almost immediately, asking her

to meet him at Scoops after the store closed.

"You sure about this, boss?" Tig asked as they watched Jarry pull up out front. She was in her personal car and, Chibs saw after she got out, civilian clothes. He wasn't sure what that meant.

He was very sure, however, that this was a conversation he needed to have alone. "It'll be fine, Tigger. Thanks, brother."

He must've sounded more confident than he felt, for Tig nodded once and headed outside, giving Jarry a sharp look as he ambled toward his bike and swung one leg over it. If she saw the stare, she ignored it, making her way briskly toward the store.

Chibs let her inside and shut the door behind her, making sure the sign said *Closed*. "You okay?" he asked, watching her slide into their usual booth at the back. She looked tired. As tired as he was.

"Not really." She huffed a humorless laugh. "Spent all day figuring out how to clean up the debris from yesterday's debacle without it blowing back on either of us."

"Thanks." He took the bench across from her. "Did you succeed?"

She leaned her head against the padded rest, closing her eyes for a moment. "I think so." She didn't offer any details and Chibs didn't ask.

"I'm sorry." He tried to take her hand between his. "For all of it."

She twisted her hand out of his grip, briefly running her thumb over the bruise circling his wrist as she did so, before folding her hands in her lap. "I won't do it again, Filip." She sat up straighter. "And I also can't be the person who puts you in jail." She stared down at her hands. "If that makes me a bad cop, so be it."

"No, luv. It makes you smart."

"No, it doesn't!" She shot upright in her seat. "It's stupid, Scotty. Stupid and—and asking for trouble. One of us is gonna end up hurt. Either I'll have to put you away, or you're gonna make me... go away." Her voice softened toward the end.

Chibs winced as she threw his old warning, spoken in hurt and anger, back in his face. He opened his mouth, wanting to assure her that he would never let that happen, but he discovered he couldn't. It was a promise he might not be able to keep.

She chuckled sadly, and he became aware she'd been watching him. "That's

what I thought."

"Althea—."

"No, Chibs, please don't." She held up her hands to silence him. "I just came by to let you know you're in the clear, you and the club. And to tell you this in person: it stops here. This—," she gestured between them, "should never have happened."

Chibs narrowed his eyes. Was she dumping him? Again? Jesus Christ, of all the things he'd expected her to say, that wasn't it. They'd been there before, each time she'd resolved to grow a conscience. It had been a while, though, and he'd thought she'd outgrown whatever bug she gotten up her arse each of the previous times.

"I told you once, and I'll tell ye again: not gonna make up your mind for ye." He managed to keep his voice quiet and steady, but it had been a lot easier to say it last time than it was now. Before she'd gotten under his skin and into his heart. Before his divided loyalties threatened to rip him apart from the inside out.

She reached across the table, her knuckles briefly touching his cheek, right on the scar. "I'm sorry. No more." She climbed to her feet and walked past him, toward the door.

"You'll be back," he told the vacated seat opposite him harshly, needing to lash out to soothe his own heartache. Her footsteps stopped and he knew she was listening. He didn't turn to look at her. "You always are. That's yer thing, Jarry. Ye get all righteous and push me away. Days later, ye come crawlin' back, begging me like a bitch in heat."

If he'd been secretly hoping that being a nasty bastard would get her riled up, he was disappointed. "Not this time, Filip. Not this time."

He sat rigidly while the small chime over the door signaled she'd pulled it open and the soft click of the latch a second later told him she was gone.

"Jesus Christ," he shouted, his voice filling the quiet store. He swept his arm across the table, knocked the condiments to the floor. The sugar bowl broke and sprayed crystals across the tiles. Brooke would be upset in the morning, but he couldn't give a flying fuck.

Something told him that, this time, Jarry had indeed walked out for good.

oOo

The lug wrench yet again slipped off the nut and Chibs scraped his knuckles raw

against the raised rim of the wheel. "Fuckin' goddamn piece of shite!"

He flung the wrench away from him. It clattered on the oil-stained concrete and skittered underneath the car he was working on. Rat and Dog—one of the regular mechanics they'd kept on during the lean times—scurried out of the bay, both casting him wary looks. "Yeah, run, you cowardly tossers!" he hollered after them.

Somewhere deep down, in a place where common sense still lived, he knew he wasn't being fair. He'd been a bear to be around this past week, ever since Jarry had gotten them clear of the charges regarding Hamill and then dumped his sorry arse.

He angrily wiped the blood off his knuckles with a filthy kerchief. Goddamn bint was the cause of all his woes, wasn't she? After everything he'd done, she'd walked out on him without a second thought.

He sighed, sucking on a knuckle that refused to stop bleeding. That wasn't fair, either. But it seemed he couldn't win. Every time he fixed one thing, something else would fall to pieces. Being king goddamn sucked.

"Hey, bro." Tig strolled into the shadowy bay from out of the sunlit yard, sunglasses perched on his nose. "Catch."

He tossed something toward Chibs and Chibs instinctively plucked it out of the air. It was a can of cold beer, condensation beading the slick surface. He popped the lid and swallowed a deep gulp. He licked his lips. "Thanks, Tigger." Being mad was thirsty work.

"Welcome." Tig inclined his head. He dangled his shades from the button hole of his work shirt and, turning steely-blue eyes onto Chibs, raised a can of his own in salute.

Chibs propped himself up on the edge of the work bench, and Tig took a clear spot next to him. The usual garage bustle went on outside the bay while they drank in silence.

"Go talk to her, man." Tig broke the quiet at last, his tone low. "'Fore it's too late."

Chibs sniffed. Wasn't any of Tig's goddamn business. Did the bylaws object to a club president punching his newly minted SAA in the nose? But he couldn't seem to find the energy. "Won't matter," he muttered.

Their sources at the sheriff's station had told them Jarry was leaving Charming. She been offered command of one of Sacramento's field service departments. Promotion for a job well done: returning peace and calm to Charming. Ironic,

really.

Tig finished his beer, crumpled the can in his fist, and tossed it toward the trash bucket near the roll-up door. He uttered a noise of triumph at making the shot and pushed from the bench. "Just sayin', boss."

With that, he slipped his shades on and sauntered back out into the blisteringly bright yard. Chibs snorted a humorless laugh. Tig Trager, relationship consultant.

Finishing his own beer, he returned to the piece of junk he'd been working on and the rusted lug nut. Patting his pockets in search of the wrench, he remember he'd thrown it. Crap, he was really losing his shite, wasn't he? Over a piece of goddamn tail.

Abandoning the car, he grabbed his cut and slipped it on. Maybe a ride would cool his temper. Clear his mind and fill the aching Jarry-shaped hole inside him.

Somehow, as if his Glide had a will of its own, he found himself fifteen minutes later sitting across the street from Jarry's apartment building. Her SUV was out front, tailgate open, the back filled with boxes of various shapes and sizes.

Straddling the bike, he watched her come out of the building with a stack of boxes in her arms so high she couldn't possibly see where she was going. Damned woman was gonna break her neck like that.

His feet were moving before his brain had caught up. "Lemme get this for ye, luv." He took the top box from her.

She let out a startled gasp, before a wry smile settled on her face. "Thanks, Scotty."

A few trips later and Chibs was lifting the last box from the kitchen counter. Holding it in his arms, he scanned the apartment. The place had never felt like a home to him. Too impersonal, a way station to bigger and better things. Now, it felt even emptier.

"Hey. What's taking you so long?"

He gave a head shake and looked at her. Really *looked* at her, standing in the doorway, in jeans and a tight T-shirt. Her hair had come loose from its pony tail, and a streak of dirt was smeared across her chin. Shifting the box he was carrying into one arm, he reached out to rub off the dust and tuck the loose strands of hair behind her ear. She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath. "Please, Chibs...."

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "For everything."

She turned her face into his touch, wordlessly accepted his apology. When she opened her eyes again, he was startled to see they were wet. He'd never seen her cry before.

"I better go," she murmured. "Don't wanna have to unload in the dark."

"Aye." He followed her outside and stashed the box on top of the others, before closing the tailgate. Rounding the car, he held the door for her while she threw her shoulder bag onto the passenger seat.

"Guess you'll need to break in a new sheriff after all, huh?" Her voice hitched and she didn't look at him. "I recommended they give it to Eglee. If you're lucky, they'll agree."

"Hey." He knuckled her chin up until she was forced to look at him. "Be safe, a'right?"

She swallowed. "You too, Scotty."

He pulled her into a hug, holding her tight against his chest.

"We had some good times, didn't we?" Her voice was muffled by his cut.

He rumbled a sad laugh. "Aye, we sure did, luv." He inhaled deeply, drawing in her scent, wanting to store it in his memory. "In another life, maybe, yeah?"

Jarry hiccuped a laugh. "Definitely." She pulled away enough to be able to smile up weakly at him. "In another life."

He held on to her for a few seconds more, unwilling to let her go. At last, knowing he couldn't postpone the inevitable any longer, he gently disentangled himself. "Should go, luv." He offered her a quick wink. "Don't wanta unload in the dark."

"Goodbye, Chibs." She held on to his hand, her fingers cool against his, while she slid into the driver's seat, until, at last, she let go to take the wheel. He shut her door behind her and she inserted the key in the ignition and started the engine. When she put the car into gear, he stepped back, giving her room to drive off.

Watching the SUV pull out into the road and get swallowed up in the traffic, he swiped his arm over his eyes. "G'bye, Althea."

Author's note: Please don't hate me...!

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